

Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride

HSS(MD) 6/2019

For Action:

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/Health and Social Care Board/HSC Trusts/NIAS
GP Medical Advisers, Health and Social Care Board
All General Practitioners and GP Locums (*for onward distribution to practice staff*)

Please see attached full addressee list

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Your Ref:

Our Ref: HSS (MD) 6/2019

Date: 10 May 2019

Dear Colleague

END OF THE 2018/19 FLU SEASON AND RELATED ISSUES

ACTION REQUIRED

Chief Executives must ensure that this information is drawn to the attention of all staff involved in the seasonal flu vaccination programme. The HSCB must ensure that this information is cascaded to all General Practitioners.

Introduction

1. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the end of the flu season for 2018/19 and a number of related issues.
2. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to all who have worked hard to manage seasonal flu during the past winter. The flu season of 2018/19 was relatively mild compared to 2017/18 but I recognise the considerable effort required to ensure the HSC was prepared for winter pressures and to complete the annual seasonal flu vaccination programme. I also appreciate that as a result of issues beyond the control of the Department the GP based vaccination programme was further complicated by the staggered delivery of one of the flu vaccines.

Surveillance

3. The Public Health Agency's regular flu bulletin is the definitive source of public health surveillance information on flu activity for Northern Ireland throughout the season. The surveillance of seasonal flu depends on accurate, timely data produced by GP sentinel practices, the labs and collated by the PHA flu team to produce the bulletin which enables us to follow the course of the flu season and respond accordingly. I would like to thank all those involved in the production of this information.

Use of Antiviral Medicines

4. The Public Health Agency surveillance data reported in the flu bulletin confirms that the circulation of flu virus in the community has fallen to low levels. **This means that**
 - **GPs and other prescribers working in primary care should not prescribe antivirals for the prevention or treatment of influenza on a HS21 prescription form.**
 - **Community pharmacists should no longer supply antiviral medicines in primary care on presentation of a HS21 prescription form.**

This advice does not impact on prescribing of antivirals in hospitals.

Seasonal flu vaccination programme

5. As you are aware due to confirmed positive cases of influenza continuing beyond the end of March, when the vaccination programme traditionally ends, the PHA had recommended that anyone still seeking the flu vaccine should be vaccinated up to the end of April. **Flu vaccine is therefore not required for pregnant women or any other population group from the start of May and over the summer in 2019 but GPs can still phone up on a case to case basis to Movianto to request the flu vaccine if they feel it is indicated.**

Vaccine uptake rates

6. At the end of March 2019, the proportion of people in Northern Ireland aged 65 years and over who had received the seasonal influenza vaccine was 70%, while the uptake in those aged under 65 in an at-risk group was 52.4%. This compares with 71.8% uptake in the over 65s, and 56% in the under 65 at-risk group for the same period last year although I note the denominator figure for both groups has increased over this period.

7. For the children's programme an uptake rate of 47.6% for those aged 2 to 4 years of age was achieved while for all children attending primary 1 to primary 7 an uptake rate of 75.9% was achieved. This compares with 50.6% and 76.5% respectively achieved for both groups last year.
8. An overall uptake of 35.4% of all front-line Health and Social Care workers was achieved by Trust's Occupational Health Units which is a 2% increase against last year's figures. When this figure is broken down between frontline social care staff and frontline health care staff it shows an overall uptake rate of 23% and 39.5% respectively. I'm pleased to note that some Trusts achieved an uptake rate of 40% plus for their frontline health care staff.
9. While this increase is to be commended I would continue to urge that the commitment and resolve put into the staff vaccination programmes during 2018/19 should be used to learn and plan for the 2019/20 flu season. **It is very important that we see further increases in future years and ensure staff protect themselves, their families and their patients.** A high flu vaccine uptake rate by staff will also help maintain service capacity during a period of high demand.
10. For 2019/20 it has been decided to create two separate targets for frontline health care staff and frontline social care staff.
 - For frontline health care staff each Trust should achieve **at least a 50% uptake rate.**
 - For frontline social care staff each Trust should achieve **at least a 40% uptake rate.**

Primary care

11. I want to acknowledge the effort of GPs and their staff to deliver the flu vaccination programme to an increasing cohort of patients, while also managing those who presented with flu and other illnesses. As mentioned earlier I fully appreciate the difficulties created for practices as a result of a vaccine manufacturer deciding to deliver their product in three batches over the period September to November. I realise this created additional work trying to manage and schedule patients but I am pleased to note that more people aged 65 years and over were vaccinated this year compared to 2017/18.

Critical Care

12. The total number of ICU admissions this season was significantly lower than in last season. Staff in critical care are commended for their ongoing

work and the robust escalation plans that are in place should these be required.

HSC Staff

13. I would wish to convey my sincere thanks to the many clinical, managerial and other staff throughout the HSC all of whom responded so admirably and professionally throughout the winter, and so minimised any potential impact on patients and clients.

Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service

14. I would like to thank the Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service for all the work they did in ensuring the flu vaccines were procured, delivered, managed and distributed throughout Northern Ireland and for providing regular updates on stock levels during the flu season.

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2019/20 FLU SEASON

Management of seasonal flu in 2019/20

15. Department of Health officials are starting to work with colleagues in the HSC to update and issue the management of seasonal flu plan for 2019/20. While the HSC coped well with the flu season for 2018/19, we still need to ensure the entire Service is ready to cope with every eventuality in the coming flu season.

Seasonal Flu Vaccination Programme 2019/20

16. The target groups for the flu vaccination programme during 2019/20 will remain unchanged and the HSS policy letter will be issued in the summer as normal. In 2019/20 all pre-school children aged 2 years and above will again be offered vaccination by their GP's while all children attending a primary school (P1 to P7 inclusive) will be offered vaccination by the school health team.
17. The Influenza Green Book chapter has recently been updated and can be viewed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influenza-the-green-book-chapter-19>

Seasonal flu vaccine supplies

18. The process to centrally purchase seasonal influenza vaccines for the 2019/20 season has been completed. As in 2018/19, and in line with the latest Green Book advice, a quadrivalent vaccine will be available for all 'at risk' patients under 65 years of age while an adjuvanted vaccine has been procured for those aged 65 years and over.

19. I fully expect the Department, PHA, HSC organisations and GPs to build on the experiences gained from previous year's vaccination programmes in order to deliver a high quality service to protect the health of the people of Northern Ireland. The seasonal flu policy letter setting out full details of the 2019/20 vaccination programme will be issued early in the summer.

Yours sincerely



Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer

Cathy Harrison
Acting Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

CIRCULATION LIST

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(for onward distribution to all relevant health protection staff)
Assistant Director Public Health (Health Protection), Public Health Agency
Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency
Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, Health and Social Care Board, *(for onward distribution to all Community Pharmacies)*
Directors of Pharmacy HSC Trusts
Director of Social Care and Children, HSCB
Family Practitioner Service Leads, Health and Social Care Board *(for cascade to GP Out of Hours services)*
Medical Directors, HSC Trusts *(for onward distribution to all Consultant Obstetricians, Paediatricians and other relevant staff)*
Directors of Nursing, HSC Trusts *(for onward distribution to all Community Nurses, and Midwives)*
Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts
RQIA *(for onward transmission to all independent providers including independent hospitals)*
Regional Medicines Information Service, Belfast HSC Trust
Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, Northern HSC Trust
University Health Contacts

This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications>