

Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride

HSS(MD) 22/2020

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) 22/2020

Date: 9 April 2020

Dear Colleague

END OF THE 2019/2020 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 2019/20 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 2019/20 was a relatively mild season but as events have shown with the Covid-19 pandemic it is vital that we do all we can to ensure the HSC is prepared for normal winter pressures and unexpected events. I also appreciate that as a result of issues beyond the control of the Department the school vaccination programme was further complicated by the staggered delivery of the Fluenz Tetra vaccine and I recognise the considerable effort required to rearrange school visits and maintain an extremely impressive uptake rate.

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. **Flu vaccine is therefore not required for pregnant women or any other population group from this point onwards and over the summer in 2020 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. The final flu update data showing the position at the end of March 2020, is not available yet. It will however be available on the PHA website later this month. As of the end of January the proportion of people in Northern Ireland aged 65 years and over who had received the seasonal influenza vaccine was 73.3%, while the uptake in those aged under 65 in an at-risk group was 56.7%. This compares with 68.7% uptake in the over 65s, and 50.7% in the under 65 at-risk group for the same period last year.
7. For the children's programme an uptake rate of 47.1% 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 75.1% was achieved. This compares with 47.2% and 75.7% respectively achieved for both groups at the same time

last year however this year, the children's programme was impacted by temporary delays.

8. By the end of January 41.1% of all Trust employed front-line Health Care workers had by vaccinated while 24.4% of Trust employed frontline health care staff had been vaccinated. I'm pleased to note that 4 out of the 6 Trusts had achieved an uptake rate of over 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 2019/20 should be used to learn and plan for the 2020/21 flu season. **It is very important that we see further increases in future years and ensure staff protect themselves, their families and their patients. This is now more important than ever as we see the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.** A high flu vaccine uptake rate by staff will help maintain service capacity during a period of high demand.
10. For 2020/21 the two separate targets for frontline health care staff and frontline social care staff will continue.
 - 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.**

School vaccine programme

11. I want to thank the school nurses for managing a challenging situation when the delivery of the vaccine, Fluenz Tetra, was delayed due to issues relating to routine testing by the manufacturer. I appreciate that rescheduling of these vaccines was not easy and I thank you for ensuring the programme was fully delivered.
12. I also 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.

Critical Care

13. The total number of ICU admissions this season was slightly higher 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

14. 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

15. 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 2020/21 FLU SEASON

Management of seasonal flu in 2020/21

16. Department of Health officials are starting to work with colleagues in the HSC to update the management of seasonal flu plan for 2020/21. While the HSC coped well with the flu season for 2019/20, given the impact of Covid-19 we now need to ensure the entire Service is ready to cope in the coming flu season.

Seasonal Flu Vaccination Programme 2020/21

17. The target groups for the flu vaccination programme during 2020/21 will remain unchanged and the HSS policy letter will be issued in the summer as normal. At this stage it is expected that in 2020/21 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.
18. The Influenza Green Book chapter can be viewed at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influenza-the-green-book-chapter-19>

Seasonal flu vaccine supplies

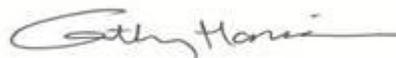
19. The process to centrally purchase seasonal influenza vaccines for the 2020/21 season is ongoing. In line with the latest Green Book advice, a cell based quadrivalent vaccine will be available for all 'at risk' patients under 65 years of age while an adjuvanted vaccine has again been procured for those aged 65 years and over.
20. I am acutely aware of the pressures right across the HSC system at present as result of the Covid-19 pandemic. However it is more important than ever

that the Department, PHA, HSC organisations and GPs 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 2020/21 vaccination programme will be issued early in the summer.

Yours sincerely



Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer



Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

CIRCULATION LIST

Director of Public Health/Executive Medical Director, Public Health Agency
(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>