

2nd July 2009

Dear Colleague,

Re: Influenza A H1 N1

As you are aware the World Health Organization has declared Phase 6 of its pandemic alert system, which means that Influenza A H1N1 (swine flu) is now spreading in communities in several countries. The WHO's decision to declare a pandemic is based on what is happening globally with the spread of the virus rather than its severity and does not suggest a sudden shift in the UK situation.

So far, the Health Protection Agency is reporting 6,929 confirmed cases of H1N1 flu in the UK with hotspots in London, the West Midlands, and Scotland. There have been 68 confirmed cases in the North West. This week, the Health Protection Agency confirmed the first case of swine flu in Wigan Borough. The individual has been treated and is recovering at home.

So far, sadly, there have been 4 deaths in the UK from H1N1, all of whom had underlying health conditions. However, at this stage there have been fewer deaths than would have been expected compared to seasonal flu.

It's important to stress that the majority of cases in the UK so far have not been severe, with those catching the virus making a full and fast recovery – though a small minority of cases have been more serious.

You may be aware that the Secretary of State for Health has announced today (2nd July) the formal decision to movement from containment to treatment.

The decision marks the move from an essentially Health Protection Agency led response with support from the NHS, to an NHS response with support from the HPA. This response will be delivered by primary care initially with a move to the National Pandemic Flu Service at a later stage. In practical terms this means there will be an end to contact tracing and prophylaxis in all regions; GPs will provide clinical diagnosis of H1N1 influenza cases rather than awaiting laboratory test results; and Primary Care Trusts will now begin to establish antiviral collection points where necessary. This new approach will mean an end to the daily reported figures from the Health Protection Agency. Members of the Public concerned they have swine flu advised to go to www.nhs.uk to check symptoms and contact the national flu information line. If still concerned contact GP who could diagnose by phone.

As you are aware the Wigan Pandemic Influenza Coordinating Group, which meets fortnightly, has been preparing for this move over the past few weeks and continue to work to ensure readiness through the transition. As part of these preparations NHS NW, the Strategic Health Authority:

* has agreed with all NHS organisations for formal NHS command and control arrangements to be activated to ensure effective communication and co-ordination of response

* has asked all PCT's to make available Anti-viral Collection Points from Monday 6 July - these will be opened on a progressive and proportionate basis. We will have our first AV Collection Point operational during office hours from Monday 6th.

* is putting in place arrangements to ensure primary care colleagues are supported over the coming weeks

Whilst the impact of this decision is mainly on health colleagues, wider multi-agency partners should continue to prepare and address the priorities so as to ensure that multi agency plans remain robust. These will include developing support from the voluntary sector for flu friends for example.

ANTI VIRAL DRUG RESISTANCE

The HPA have been monitoring antiviral drug resistance since the beginning of this outbreak. Routine sampling in the UK has shown that there is currently no resistance to either oseltamivir (tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza). HPA continues to watch for antiviral resistance and will be carrying out regular sample testing throughout this outbreak

MASS GATHERINGS

Currently the Government is not advising avoidance of mass gatherings or social events and there are no restrictions in place. This includes sporting events, concerts and other public events.

It is important that those attending mass gatherings should continue to adopt the hygiene measures designed to protect everyone from the virus, including washing their hands frequently and covering their mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing. The position will be reviewed if the situation changes.

VACCINE

A crucial step towards large scale production of a vaccine against swine flu has been completed in the UK by the National Institute for Biological Standards and Control, part of the Health Protection Agency. The Department of Health has made arrangements for the supply of sufficient H1N1 swine flu vaccine for the population of the UK and has contracts with Baxter Healthcare Ltd and GlaxoSmithKline. The first limited supplies of vaccine are expected to be available from August, increasing over the next three months and will continue over about 12 months. Whilst sufficient vaccine is being secured for the UK population, because of the phased delivery of the vaccine, prioritisation for vaccination of individuals and groups will be needed. The decision on prioritisation will be taken on the basis of epidemiological evidence, vaccine supply and capacity of the NHS to implement the programme. This decision will be subject to further work over the summer period. Part of the ongoing work of the Wigan PICG, therefore, is to finalise arrangements for a local mass vaccination campaign.

I would continue to advise people to adopt the following hygiene habits to reduce spread:

- Cover you nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing ("Catch it!")
- Safely dispose of tissues used for sneezing ("Bin it!")
- Wash your hands after coughing or sneezing and wash hard surfaces that may have been exposed with a standard cleaning product ("Kill it!")

On behalf of the Wigan Pandemic Influenza Coordinating Group, I would like to thank you for all your efforts in supporting the Borough response to Pandemic Influenza and excellent contributions from individuals and organisations to this major health challenge.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Kate Ardern MBChB, MSc, FFPH
Director of Public Health for the Borough of Wigan
Chair of the Pandemic Influenza Co-ordinating Group

For further information : KEY WEBSITES

Directgov (www.direct.gov.uk/swineflu) the primary government website for essential cross-government swine flu messages; NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk) the primary public-facing health information and advice service; the Department of Health website (www.dh.gov.uk) the home of content relating to health and care professionals; and Business Link (www.businesslink.gov.uk/swineflu) the home of business-related information. The dedicated Swine Flu page on the FCO website is at: www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/swine-flu.