

Chief Medical Officer
Professor Sir Michael McBride



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD) 16/2022

For Action:

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/
HSC Trusts/NIAS,
GP Medical Advisers, Strategic Planning
and Performance Group – SPPG,
All General Practitioners and GP Locums (*for onward
distribution to practice staff*)
SPPG Head of Pharmacy and Medicines
Management (*for onward distribution to
community pharmacies*)

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Your Ref:
Our Ref: HSS (MD) 16/2022
Date: 20 April 2022

Please see attached full addressee list

Dear Colleague

END OF THE 2021/22 FLU SEASON AND RELATED ISSUES

ACTION REQUIRED

Public Flu Vaccination Programme

Chief Executives must ensure this information is drawn to the attention of all staff involved in the seasonal influenza vaccination programme, including:

- school health teams, health visitors, community children nurses, and paediatricians
- physicians managing patients with chronic medical conditions, oncologists, geriatricians, district nurses, treatment room nurses
- midwives, obstetricians
- Occupational Health Departments, Trust Peer Vaccinators

The SPPG must ensure this information is cascaded to all General Practitioners, practice managers and community pharmacies for onward distribution to all staff involved in the seasonal flu vaccination programme.

The RQIA must ensure this information is cascaded to all Independent Sector Care Homes for onward distribution to all staff involved in the seasonal flu programme.



Introduction

1. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the end of the flu season for 2021/22 and to give providers and stakeholders of the seasonal flu vaccination programme information on the eligible cohorts for the 2022/23 seasonal flu vaccination programme.

End of the 2021/22 Flu Vaccination Programme

2. The Flu Vaccination Programme ended on 31 March 2022. Providers are therefore **not required** to vaccinate pregnant women or any other population group against flu from this point onwards and over the summer in 2022 but GPs can still phone on a case by case basis to Movianto to request the flu vaccine if they feel it is indicated.
3. The 2020/21 and 2021/22 flu vaccination seasons have been the most ambitious yet, as we sought to offer protection to as many eligible people as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. This involved increased uptake ambitions for pre-existing cohorts, as well as extension of the vaccination offer to additional cohorts at pace.
4. We would like to extend a huge thank you to all those involved for your hard work during very challenging times which led to some of the best flu vaccine uptake rates ever achieved, with more people vaccinated than ever before. This has been achieved alongside the major success of the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination to which many of you have contributed.
5. We want to specifically acknowledge all those involved in the planning and delivery of the Seasonal Flu Vaccination Programme, including the Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, PHA, HSCB/SPPG, HSC Trusts, NIAS, community pharmacies and GPs and their staff. We also wish to convey our 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.

Influenza Activity

6. As a result of non-pharmaceutical interventions in place for COVID-19 (such as wearing of face coverings, physical and social distancing, and restricted international travel) influenza activity levels were extremely low globally in 2021/22. This winter we need to be prepared for higher levels of flu and the possibility that it could be a bad flu year, with more of the population susceptible to influenza given the low levels in the last two seasons.

7. Seasonal flu vaccination remains an important public health intervention and a key priority for 2022/23 to reduce morbidity, mortality and hospitalisation associated with flu at a time when the HSC will be managing winter pressures, potentially including further outbreaks of COVID-19.

Surveillance

8. 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. We would like to thank all those involved in the production of this information.

Use of Antiviral Medicines

9. The Public Health Agency surveillance data reported in the flu bulletin confirms that the circulation of flu virus in the community has remained at baseline 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 not supply antiviral medicines in primary care on presentation of a HS21 prescription form.

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

Vaccine uptake rates

10. We will write to you again at the end of April when the final flu vaccination uptake rates for the 2021/22 programme will be available.

Critical Care

11. As flu levels were extremely low this season, to date there have been no admissions to ICU with confirmed influenza. Staff in critical care are to be commended for their ongoing work and the robust escalation plans that remain in place should these be required.

Looking ahead to the 2022/23 flu season

12. Eligible cohorts for flu vaccination are based on the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisations. The programme aims to provide direct protection to those who are at higher risk of influenza

associated morbidity and mortality and to reduce transmission to all age groups through the vaccination of children.

13. Those eligible for HSC flu vaccine in 2022/23 are:
 - all preschool children aged 2 to 4 years on 1 September 2022
 - all primary and secondary (up to year 12) school children
 - those aged six months to under 65 years in clinical risk groups (as defined by the influenza chapter in 'Immunisation against infectious disease' (the 'Green Book')
 - those aged 65 years and over
 - pregnant women
 - those in long-stay residential care homes
 - carers
 - close contacts of immunocompromised individuals
 - frontline¹ health and social care workers (HSCWs) employed by:
 - Health and Social Care Trusts including NIAS
 - community HSC providers including GP practices, pharmacies, dentists
 - registered independent sector residential care or nursing home
 - registered domiciliary care providers
 - voluntary managed hospice provider
14. Cohorts that were eligible in the 2021/22 season but that are **not** included in the cohorts for 2022/23 are:
 - those aged 50 to 64 years not in clinical risk groups.
15. The Influenza Green Book chapter can be viewed at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influenza-the-green-book-chapter-19>
16. The HSS Seasonal Influenza Policy letter will issue in due course and will include:
 - Flu vaccination programme start date
 - Vaccine supply and ordering details
 - Detail on Health and Social Care Workers
 - Recommended vaccines for 2022/23
17. The annual flu immunisation programme is a critical element of the system-wide approach for delivering robust and resilient health and care services during the winter. The flu vaccination will help protect our staff from flu. It will help to reduce GP consultations, unplanned hospital admissions,

¹ This extends the definition used in the Green Book to include clinical and non-clinical staff who have contact with patients.

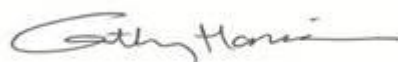
pressure on Emergency Departments and staff sickness levels. In light of the ongoing pandemic this will be more important than ever.

18. We are 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, GPs and primary care teams and Community Pharmacy build on the experiences gained from previous years' vaccination programmes in order to continue to deliver an effective high quality service to protect the health of the people of Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer



Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

Circulation List

Director of Public Health/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, SPPG (*for onward distribution to Community Pharmacies*)
Directors of Pharmacy HSC Trusts
Director of Social Care and Children, SPPG
Family Practitioner Service Leads, SPPG (*for cascade to GP Out of Hours services*)
Medical Directors, HSC Trusts (*for onward distribution to all Consultants, Occupational Health Physicians and School Medical Leads*)
Nursing Directors, 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*)
Medicines Management Pharmacists, SPPG (*for cascade to prescribing advisers*)
Regional Medicines Information Service, Belfast HSC Trust
Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, Northern HSC Trust
Professor Donna Fitzsimons, Head of School of Nursing and Midwifery QUB
Professor Sonja McIlpatrick, Head of School of Nursing, University of Ulster
Heather Finlay, CEC
Donna Gallagher, Open University
Professor Paul McCarron, Head of School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, UU
Professor Colin McCoy, Head of School, School of Pharmacy, QUB
Professor Colin Adair, Postgraduate Pharmacy Dean, NI Centre for Pharmacy

Learning and Development, QUB
Joe Brogan, Assistant Director of Integrated Care, SPPG
Michael Donaldson, SPPG (*for distribution to all General Dental Practitioners*)
Raymond Curran, Head of Ophthalmic Services, SPPG (*for distribution to Community Optometrists*)
Trade Union Side
Clinical Advisory Team
Louise McMahon, Director of Integrated Care, SPPG

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>