

From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride



HSS(MD) 8/2017

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*)

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Please see attached full addressee list

Your Ref:
Our Ref: HSS(MD) 8/2017
Date: 1 June 2017

Dear Colleague

END OF 2016/17 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 2016/17 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. I recognise the considerable effort required to ensure the HSC was prepared for the normal winter pressures and to complete the annual seasonal flu vaccination programme.

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 the use of antiviral medicines for the prevention and treatment of influenza is no longer indicated.**

Seasonal flu vaccination programme

5. As you are aware due to confirmed positive cases of influenza continuing beyond the end of March and April, the PHA had recommended that anyone still seeking the flu vaccine should be vaccinated up to the end of May. **Flu vaccine is therefore not required for pregnant women or any other population group from June over the summer in 2017.**

Vaccine uptake rates

6. At the end of March 2017, the proportion of people in Northern Ireland aged 65 years and over who had received the seasonal influenza vaccine was 71.9%, while the uptake in those aged under 65 in an at-risk group was 57.1%. This compares with 74.4% uptake in the over 65s, and 59.9% in the under 65 at-risk group for the same period last year.
7. For the children's programme an uptake rate of 52.6% for 2 to 4 year olds was achieved while for all primary 1 to primary 7 children an uptake of 78.3% was achieved. This compares with 50.5% and 76.8% achieved for both groups last year.
8. An uptake of 29% of front-line Health and Social Care workers was also achieved by Trust's Occupational Health Units. While I acknowledge the efforts put into this to achieve a 4.4% increase against the previous year's figures it is still too low.
9. It is important that lessons from previous vaccination programmes are learnt, and are used to significantly improve uptake by this group, to protect themselves and their patients and to maintain service capacity during a period of high demand. The Commissioning Plan for 2016/17 included an indicator of performance for flu vaccine uptake by front-line HCWs, and in 2016/17 each Trust was expected to achieve a 40% uptake by its front-line staff. It is anticipated that this recommendation will also be included for 2017/18.

Primary care

10. 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.

Critical Care

11. The total number of ICU admissions this season was lower than in the previous two seasons. 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

12. 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 Procurement Service

13. I would like to thank the Regional 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 2017/18 FLU SEASON

Management of seasonal flu in 2017/18

14. Department of Health officials are working with colleagues in the HSC to update and issue the management of seasonal flu plan for 2017/18. While the HSC coped well with the flu season for 2016/17, we still need to ensure the HSC is ready to cope with every eventuality in the coming flu season.

Seasonal Flu Vaccination Programme 2017/18

15. The flu programme for 2017/18 will remain largely unchanged. In 2017/18 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 again be offered vaccination by the school health team.
16. Further details of the vaccination programme will be included in the latest chapter on seasonal flu in the Green Book due to be issued shortly.

Seasonal flu vaccine supplies

17. The process to centrally purchase seasonal influenza vaccines for the 2017/18 season is on track. I fully expect the Department, PHA, HSC organisations and GPs to build on the experiences gained from the 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 2017/18 vaccination programme will be issued shortly.

Yours sincerely



Michael McBride
Chief Medical 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 & 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 & 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

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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>
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