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The Pandemrix vaccine will reach acute trusts on 21 October and general practices on 26 October

H1N1 vaccination begins in UK as English cases rise by 27 000

Sophie Cook *BMJ*

The swine flu vaccination programme will begin on Wednesday 21 October, when the first vaccines are distributed to acute trusts for use in “very high risk” patients and healthcare professionals, the chief medical officer Liam Donaldson has announced.

At the Department of Health briefing of 15 October, Professor Donaldson said that he was worried by the fact that the proportion of patients admitted to hospital who are going into intensive care has risen from one in eight to one in five.

He said that the Pandemrix vaccine (GlaxoSmithKline) will reach acute trusts on 21 October and general practices and mental health trusts on 26 October. Celvapan (Baxter) will be distributed from 26 October and will be reserved for patients in priority groups with anaphylactic reactions to egg.

In hospitals, priority will be given to patients at high risk and front line staff. General practices will target pregnant women and people with chronic disease.

Professor Donaldson said that the department was going “to try extremely hard” to achieve substantial uptake in health workers, where it has traditionally been low, to protect patients and reduce disruption to services.

The Ministry of Defence also announced last week that the vaccination is going to be offered to UK troops deployed in Afghanistan. They said that this will aim to “maintain the numbers of troops available to commanders.”

David Salisbury, the Department of Health

director of immunisation, emphasised the need for pregnant women to be vaccinated because they are at particular risk.

Two more deaths in pregnant women were announced last week in the United Kingdom, making a total of six deaths in pregnant women there. Overall, the number of people who have had the infection in England rose by 27 000 in the week ending 11 October, compared with a rise of 18 000 in the previous week. The Health Protection Agency estimates that 370 000 people in England have now had the virus.

There had been a further increase in patients admitted to hospital, with a total of 364, 74 of whom went into intensive care, as of 8 am on 14 October. Professor Donaldson said this was a “significant change” and represented “the highest proportion of hospital patients who have been in intensive care since this all began.”

Until the last week, the proportion of patients who had been admitted to intensive care was about 12-13%, but it has now reached 20%. Although there has been no change in the virus noted, Professor Donaldson said that “we are seeing more serious cases than we have seen before” and admitted that this was worrying him.

The Health Protection Agency reported that the main burden of flu-like illness nationally was in 5-24 year olds. Deaths have continued to increase, with the UK total now at 106 (83 in England, 15 in Scotland, 4 in Wales, and 4 in Northern Ireland).

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Adjuvants in H1N1

Ned Stafford *HAMBURG*

Concerns are growing in Germany about the safety of the swine flu vaccine that will be available to the general population after news was leaked last weekend that top politicians and some government employees will be given an alternative vaccine.

State and federal health officials announced in August the purchase of 50 million doses of Pandemrix, the H1N1 vaccine produced by GlaxoSmithKline. Pandemrix contains an adjuvant that includes squalene and boosts the effectiveness of the vaccine, meaning a much smaller amount of inactivated virus is needed for an effective dose. However, some experts say that adjuvants can produce inoculation reactions, such as headache and fever, or possibly even longer term side effects.

Michael Kochen, president of the German College of General Practitioners and Family Physicians, told the *BMJ* that Pandemrix has not been sufficiently tested to be declared safe for millions of people, especially small children and pregnant women. His main concern is the adjuvant.

He will not take the vaccine himself and has advised doctors in the association not to give it to patients, saying that the potential risks outweigh the benefits. He described the

Public health messages



Characters from global handwashing day

Zosia Kmiotowicz *LONDON*

When it comes to communicating the dangers of faeces men are most likely to take notice of messages that invoke disgust, but women respond best to notices that impart knowledge, a study has found (*American Journal of Public Health* 2009;99(suppl):S405-11).

Researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in London

vaccine provoke row in Germany

50 million doses for Germany as “a large scale experiment on the German population.”

Some doctors have voiced mild concern about Pandemrix in the past two months, especially about potential side effects in pregnant women and children. But those scattered concerns erupted into widespread protest over the weekend, after *Der Spiegel* news magazine reported that the federal interior ministry had bought 200 000 doses of Celvapan, Baxter’s adjuvant-free H1N1 vaccine, to be used by top government officials (www.spiegel.de, 19 Oct, “Germans unhappy with alternative swine flu vaccine for politicians”).

Frank Ulrich Montgomery, vice president of the German Medical Association, called for adjuvant-free vaccinations for pregnant women and children. In the German press he accused the government of mismanagement and creating an “appalling information chaos” surrounding H1N1 vaccination.

Recent polls show that only 12% of Germans definitely plan to be vaccinated against H1N1, with 19% saying that they will probably have the vaccine.

A spokeswoman for the German interior ministry rejected accusations that the ministry had ordered a less risky vaccine for top officials, saying that the order was placed “months ago”

before the difference between the two vaccines was deemed important.

In the same article, *Der Spiegel* quoted doctors concerned about the safety of adjuvants. In response to the article, GlaxoSmithKline Germany issued a press release saying that the interior ministry’s purchase of a second vaccine was “legitimate” and does not indicate that one vaccine is better than the other.

GlaxoSmithKline defended the safety of the vaccine, noting that the European Medicines Agency had recommended that both vaccines, as well as Focetria from Novartis, be authorised by the European Commission. It added that so far 22 governments had ordered 440 million doses of Pandemrix, and other governments are considering purchases.

Disclosure of the interior ministry’s purchase of the H1N1 vaccine came a week after the defence ministry confirmed news reports that Bundeswehr soldiers and their families on foreign deployments or preparing for missions abroad would be vaccinated with Celvapan.

After news of the interior ministry purchase, both the chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the federal health minister, Ulla Schmidt, indicated that they would not take Celvapan.

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that invoke disgust are most effective for men

tested the impact of different messages on handwashing with soap that were flashed on to screens at the entrance to toilets at UK service station. Sensors were used to monitor the use of soap by 200 000 people who used the facilities.

Several messages were tested, from “Water doesn’t kill germs, soap does” to “Don’t be a dirty soap dodger.” Overall the study found that 32% of men washed their hands with soap compared with 64% of women.

The message with the biggest impact was, “Is the person next to you washing with soap?” but there were differences in how men and women responded to the prompts. Men tended to react best to messages that invoked disgust, such as “Soap it off or eat it later,” which increased soap use by 9.8%. For women, messages that included knowledge worked best, increasing soap use by 9.4%.

The researchers are trying to raise awareness about the importance of handwashing. Every year 3.5 million children in the developing world die from diarrhoeal diseases and pneumonia. An estimated one million lives could be saved with universal handwashing with soap.

Two hygiene and sanitation champions were celebrated on 14 October at the “international golden poo awards” for their outstanding contributions to improving sanitation and good hygiene practice around the world. The awards are one of several UK activities taking place on global handwashing day, a campaign in five continents, to encourage millions of people to wash their hands with soap.

The hygiene award went to Mary Swai, head of the environmental, sanitation, and hygiene section of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in Tanzania, and Rebecca Budimu, an environmental engineer for Unicef. Their efforts have led to the development of plans to improve critical hygiene and sanitation practices in communities in 80 out of 136 districts in the country.

The “golden poo” for sanitation went to Namyuangu J Byakatonda, minister of state for water in Uganda, who spearheaded a national sanitation campaign in 2008 that involved partners from government and civil society.

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Healthcare reform bill could reach Obama by Christmas

Janice Hopkins Tanne NEW YORK

By early November the US Senate and the House of Representatives are likely to have pulled together several bills on healthcare reform and to have begun debating them.

There are five bills, three in the House of Representatives and two in the Senate. Committees are working to come up with a single bill for each chamber.

The House and Senate will then debate each bill, propose amendments, and vote. After that a House and Senate conference committee will reconcile the bills, both House and Senate will vote on the final bill, and then send it to Barack Obama to sign or veto.

Tom Harkin, senator and Iowa Democrat, told the Bloomberg news service that he expected the Senate bill to be finished before 26 October, and he hoped the final legislation would reach the president by Christmas (www.bloomberg.com, 16 Oct 2009, “Harkin says health overhaul will include public plan (update 2)”).

All the bills include similar requirements, with different approaches.



GERALD HERBERT/AP/PA

Obama will sign or veto the final bill

Requirements in the bills

- An “individual mandate” that requires everyone to purchase health insurance and imposes penalties on those who do not
- Subsidies or tax credits to help people with low and middle incomes and small employers buy health insurance
- Requirements for most employers to provide health insurance or face a penalty
- Requirements that insurance plans accept people with pre-existing conditions
- Defined package of benefits or services that every insurance plan must cover
- Expanding eligibility for the Medicaid insurance programme for poor people and the State Children’s Health Insurance Plan
- Establishing insurance exchanges, where small employers and individuals who are not covered by employer insurance can shop for policies provided by different health insurance plans
- Setting up cost containment and quality improvement mechanisms
- Including prevention and wellness programmes
- Making provisions for long term care.

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