



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

Dear Colleague

UPDATE ON PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 INFLUENZA VACCINATION

On 4 December 2009, I wrote to primary healthcare providers about the extension of approval of Panvax H1N1® to children aged under 10 years and the availability of Panvax H1N1 Junior® for children aged under 3 years.

I am writing to you now to:

- encourage you to offer pandemic (H1N1) 2009 vaccination to all your patients;
- inform you of the availability of new pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza resources; and
- advise you of the extension to the eligibility criteria for free seasonal influenza vaccine under the National Immunisation Program.

As you know, Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza is similar to seasonal flu but different in some important ways. Compared to seasonal flu it causes more hospitalisation, more hospitalisation in children under 5 and more admissions to ICU with viral pneumonia (around 700 in 2009 with around 55 per year for the last 5 years).

Despite the considerable efforts made by primary care and other immunisation providers, vaccination coverage remains currently below what is needed to confidently protect the community against an anticipated second wave of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza this year. The number of doses of vaccine distributed to date and preliminary serosurveillance data indicate that the majority of the Australian population remains unprotected from pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza.

Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza is expected to return for a second wave. The World Health Organization reports that, while the peak of the influenza season has passed in much of the temperate northern hemisphere, virus transmission remains active in a number of countries. In most northern hemisphere countries, flu came early and more than 90% of viruses subtyped over their winter season have been pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza. Currently cases of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza continue to occur here with around 15 confirmed cases each week.

The return of children to school in the North American autumn was associated with a substantial increase in the number of cases of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza, an early start to the flu season and a higher influenza peak than usual. As the new school year gets underway in Australia, there is a risk pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza will start to circulate again, associated with an early influenza season here. It takes up to 2 weeks for immunity to develop following vaccination, so it is important to vaccinate anyone who wants protection against pandemic (H1N1) 2009 as soon as possible.

Vaccination should be offered to everybody, not only those in high risk groups. In the 2009 season, 38% of deaths from pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza occurred in people with no known risk factors and the median age of death was 53 years, compared with 83 years from seasonal influenza. It is particularly important to vaccinate children, adolescents and young adults as pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza spreads more readily in these age groups.

The Australian Government will be informing the general public of the importance of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza vaccination in a communications campaign in the coming weeks. Please talk to your patients about the importance of getting vaccinated. Enclosed are a poster for display and a sample of a brochure for your patients to take home. You can order or download more brochures by visiting www.healthemergency.gov.au or by calling 1800 020 103.

While the Australian 2010 seasonal trivalent influenza vaccine (TIV) will provide protection against the pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza strain, patients should be advised not to wait for the availability of the seasonal vaccine to be vaccinated against pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza. The eligibility for free TIV is restricted. Patients can be assured that it is safe to have Panvax H1N1[®] followed by TIV within a short period. Boosting of immunity to pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza will occur if the vaccines are given at least a month apart. Specific advice on the use of Panvax H1N1[®] and TIV in children under the age of 10 years has been developed by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) and is available on the Health Professionals page of the Health Emergency website <http://www.healthemergency.gov.au>

While the Australian Government this year is expanding the eligibility for free seasonal influenza vaccine under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) seasonal vaccine supplies will be limited as usual. In addition to all people aged 65 years and over, eligibility now includes all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over and anyone over 6 months of age who is at increased risk of complications of influenza, including those with chronic diseases and pregnant women. More detailed information about the changes to the NIP will be sent to you within the next few weeks.

Those at particular risk from seasonal influenza should be given TIV once it is available¹ even if they have had Panvax H1N1[®]. In addition to protection against pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza, the TIV will protect against H3N2 and B especially relevant for older people and in line with the recommendations published on the Therapeutic Goods Administration website at <http://www.tga.gov.au/committee/aivc.htm>. TIV is recommended for all at risk groups in the 2010 season. However pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza is anticipated to be the predominant strain for the rest of the population.

While there will be sufficient TIV available this season for those who are eligible under the new NIP arrangements, there will not be sufficient TIV to vaccinate the whole population. There are plentiful supplies of Panvax H1N1[®] which can be offered free to anyone attending your practice especially children and young adults.

Yours sincerely



Professor Jim Bishop AO
MD MMed MBBS FRACP FRCPA

February 2010

¹ It is anticipated that TIV vaccine for the NIP will be distributed over the period from mid March to late April 2010.