

To: Royal College of Midwives  
Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

cc: British Medical Association

16 December 2010

Dear Colleagues

### **FLU VACCINATION FOR PREGNANT WOMEN**

I am writing to seek your support to urge your members to encourage all pregnant women, no matter what stage of pregnancy, to get their flu vaccine as soon as possible.

Over the last few days, we have been alerted by the Health Protection Agency (HPA) and other sources that the incidence of severe illness due to influenza infection requiring access to critical care services has increased. At the 7 December, sixteen confirmed cases in 18-35 year olds are in hospital (all due to H1N1 infection), with a number of probable cases currently under investigation. Many, but not all, of those cases have underlying conditions including pregnancy. Eleven of twelve cases currently receiving ECMO treatment are confirmed or probable swine flu (H1N1) cases. Since the beginning of September, eleven deaths associated with influenza infection have been reported in the UK. Ten cases are associated with A(H1N1) 2009 infection and one with influenza B. Ages ranged from four to 51 years including four cases under 10 years.

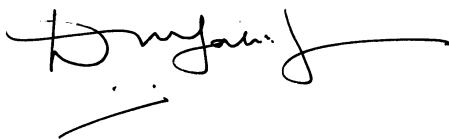
Pregnant women are being offered the flu vaccine this year, regardless of their stage of pregnancy. It is particularly important that they take up this offer because pregnant women are more likely to have serious illness if they catch flu, especially H1N1.

While flu is a mild illness for most people, it can be very serious. Experience in the UK and other countries suggests that pregnant women are around four times more likely to develop serious complications as a result of H1N1 compared to women who are not pregnant. These complications include pneumonia and heart and lung problems and pregnant women are about 10 times more likely to become so ill they need to be admitted to hospital.

The current seasonal flu vaccine, which offers protection against H1N1 and two other types of flu, is licensed for use in pregnancy by the European Medicines Agency. Although pregnant women and their carers are naturally cautious about taking vaccines, there is no evidence of this type of vaccine doing any harm at all during pregnancy. Flu vaccines have now been given to hundreds of thousands of pregnant women world wide and are very closely monitored.

I attach at Annex A some background briefing which addresses some of the main questions and concerns about this winter's seasonal flu vaccination programme. Please feel free to make this available to your members.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D M Salisbury', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Professor D M SALISBURY CB**  
FRCP FRCPCH FFPH  
Director of Immunisation

## **ANNEX A: Q&A**

### **Should pregnant women get the flu jab?**

Pregnant women have not routinely been offered seasonal influenza vaccine in the past unless they were in a clinical risk group. However, there is good evidence that all pregnant women are at increased risk from complications if they contract the H1N1 (swine flu) virus. In light of this, pregnant women in clinical risk groups will continue to be offered the seasonal influenza vaccine as usual. But in addition, those pregnant women who are not in a clinical risk group and who have not already received a dose of H1N1 swine influenza vaccine will be offered the trivalent seasonal influenza vaccine this season. GPs should also consider on an individual basis the clinical needs of all their patients.

### **Is this year's seasonal influenza vaccine safe for pregnant women?**

This year's seasonal flu vaccines are expected to have a similar safety profile to previous seasonal vaccines. These are safe in pregnancy and there is no reason to suspect that incorporation of the 'swine flu' antigen into the vaccine carries any specific risks. Monovalent (single strain) swine flu vaccines were administered to at least half a million pregnant women across Europe during the pandemic with no evidence of any specific safety risks.

### **Can the flu jab actually cause flu?**

No. The vaccine doesn't contain any live virus, so it cannot cause flu. Some people get 'flu-like symptoms' - a slight temperature and aching muscles for a couple of days afterwards. Their arm may feel a bit sore where they were injected. Any other reactions are rare - flu jabs have a very good safety profile.

### **Can I have a seasonal flu vaccine that does not contain H1N1?**

This year's seasonal flu vaccine contains three flu strains: the H1N1 flu strain antigen and the antigens of two other flu viruses that are predicted to be circulating this year. Each year WHO makes recommendations about the strains to be included in influenza vaccines for the coming winter. The influenza A (H1N1)v strain (swine flu) is expected to be the predominant influenza strain once again during the 2010/11 influenza season. For this reason, WHO recommended that this strain be included in the trivalent seasonal influenza vaccine for the 2010/11 influenza season.

Manufacturers follow the WHO advice on strains to include in seasonal vaccines and produce hundreds of millions of doses for the Northern Hemisphere by July of each year. All countries accept the vaccine that has been formulated in accordance with the WHO recommendations. There simply is no production of 'pick and choose' vaccines and it is unhelpful to the public to imply that there could be a choice of vaccine without a particular strain in it.

### **Has the vaccine from last year been used to make the vaccine for this year?**

No. The seasonal influenza vaccines for use this autumn have not been made by incorporating unused stocks of the H1N1 influenza vaccine. They contain the H1N1 flu strain antigen and the antigens of two other flu viruses that are predicted to be circulating this year.

### **How effective is the flu vaccine?**

Studies show that flu vaccines give about 70 to 80 per cent protection against flu infection. That is why it has been recommended to those aged 65 and over and those in an at risk groups. In older people, protection against infection may be lower, but there is good evidence showing that immunisation reduces complications, including bronchopneumonia, hospital admissions and deaths.

**Should health staff who had the H1N1 last year October 2009 have the combined vaccine currently being offered in Winter 2010?**

The fact that some staff may have had the H1N1 swine flu vaccine last year does not affect advice that they should receive this year's trivalent seasonal flu vaccine. There are no contraindications to receiving the trivalent seasonal flu vaccine (which contains an H1N1 flu strain) this season if a patient has previously received the H1N1 vaccine.

**How safe is the trivalent (seasonal) vaccine?**

Patients should be aware that there is no reason to suspect that the inclusion of the H1N1 swine influenza strain in this year's seasonal influenza vaccine will affect the established safety profile of these vaccines. They contain the H1N1 flu strain antigen and the antigens of two other flu viruses that are predicted to be circulating this year. This is in order that the vaccines provide protection against the three influenza strains that are predicted to be circulating this year.

The safety of swine flu vaccines has been thoroughly reviewed by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and the UK Government's independent expert advisory committee, the Commission on Human Medicines (CHM). More than six million doses have been given in the UK, with more than 30 million given across Europe. The CHM reviewed the UK safety experience with swine flu vaccines in July and advised that despite substantial usage over a very short time period, and based on both UK and EU/worldwide data, no significant safety issues have been identified and the safety profile is reassuring. There is no evidence to indicate that any H1N1 flu vaccine has caused the death of any patients.

Tens of millions of more doses of various different H1N1 flu vaccines have been given throughout the world over the past year. No serious new risks have been identified and the safety profile is broadly similar to that of seasonal influenza vaccines. The H1N1 flu component has been included in all seasonal flu vaccines this year in all countries, including the vaccines recently used in the southern hemisphere.