

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

BY EMAIL - derek.baker@education-ni.gov.uk

Derek Baker
Permanent Secretary
Department of Education

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 0563
Email: Michael.McBride@health-ni.gov.uk
Your Ref:
Our Ref:
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Dear Derek

PREPARING FOR THE 2020/21 INFLUENZA SEASON

It is gratifying to see the progress that is being made on preparations for the re-opening of schools for all children. I am acutely aware of the many challenges that schools will encounter due to the measures in place to help control the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. However, given that currently there is no vaccine to combat Covid-19, I wanted to re-emphasize the particular importance this year of the school-based annual flu vaccination programme in helping to reduce the risk of concomitant circulation of flu and Covid-19 during autumn and winter.

Early evidence suggests co-infection is associated with increased mortality of over two fold compared to those with Covid-19 alone and increases the likelihood of complications in individuals as well as increasing the pressure on the Health Service. It is therefore essential that we try to maximise the uptake of the flu vaccine in schools this autumn and, for this reason, additional doses of the Fluenz Tetra flu vaccine have been purchased at substantial cost to enable School Health Teams to achieve an uptake rate up to 95%. This will involve additional visits to schools to ensure all children are given the opportunity to receive the vaccine.

Maximising the uptake rate will only be possible with the continued good will and assistance of schools in facilitating school nursing teams in the delivery of the vaccination programme. I appreciate that this will be extra challenging this autumn given the social distancing measures required and the inevitable disruption this will cause to the running of schools. As a contingency, we may have to consider back up arrangements to the schools programme but evidence from previous years indicates that the uptake rate achieved within a school is consistently much higher than that achieved in a community setting.

In addition to maximising the uptake rate in primary schools it is our intention to extend the flu vaccination programme to include all children in year 8 in secondary

schools. This is in line with similar approaches in the other UK countries. The intention is to help increase the protection from influenza to individual children and, consequently, to wider society at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be still with us. The extension of vaccination to the older children is also in line with an earlier recommendation from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). However, subject to the successful development of a Covid-19 vaccine, the extension into year 8 may be for this flu season only.

Incorporating year 8 children into the schools programme will be a further challenge for the school health teams and I realise it will also be an additional issue for secondary schools to handle during the autumn term. Full details of exactly how this year's programme will be delivered have still to be agreed and to a large extent will depend on how schools operate in the autumn. I would therefore welcome the support of the Department of Education in endorsing the school-based flu vaccination programme and in facilitating its implementation. I should be most grateful if you would ask for head teachers' full cooperation in allowing school health teams' access to schools and pupils in order to help ensure that a high uptake rate is achieved. To help facilitate planning for this year's school programme my colleagues in the Department and PHA will contact Jill Fitzgerald and Brendan O'Reilly (Education Authority) to arrange a meeting.

I am aware of how difficult the last few months have been for schools and I wouldn't want to add to this burden but I'm sure you will agree that it is extremely important that we take all necessary measures to help reduce the risk of concomitant circulation of flu and Covid-19 during the forthcoming autumn and winter.

Yours sincerely



DR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer

cc Jillian Johnston, PHA
Jill Fitzgerald, DE
Brendan O'Reilly, EA
Gerard Collins, DoH
Mary Frances McManus, DoH