

Medical chief warns of extremists' attacking flu vaccination campaign

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David Rose, Health Correspondent

Extremists are attempting to derail the introduction of a national swine flu vaccination campaign, the country's top doctor has warned.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer for England, spoke out against protests aimed at deterring people from having the jab. In one case, a Birmingham hospital had already been flyposted with anti-vaccination messages as its immunisation campaign started.

Estimates suggest that 78,000 people in England fell ill with swine flu last week, an increase on the 53,000 new cases in the week before.

The death of an unnamed Scottish patient from the Borders area was reported last night, bringing the total number of deaths linked to swine flu in Britain to 138.

Sir Liam said that there had been a "very substantial increase in the numbers [of people] in intensive care" in the past week, with one in five of the 751 patients in hospital being in a critical condition.

He added that the vaccine against the H1N1 virus offered the chance to prevent vulnerable people developing serious illness, and spoke out against a poster campaign that depicted the jab as a "weapon of mass destruction".

"We have had a lot of unfair public criticism and attacks in an attempt to scare people about a vaccine that's potentially life-saving," he added.

"We have seen it before with vaccines like MMR [the combined jab for measles, mumps and rubella], and now extremists are doing the same thing again."

Many doctors have not yet received the first doses of the Pandemrix vaccine, made by GlaxoSmithKline, but health officials said that all patients in priority groups should be vaccinated by mid-December.

These include adults and children with chronic health conditions, pregnant women and frontline health workers.

A retrospective study of the deaths in England showed that 65 per cent would have been eligible for a priority vaccination against the H1N1 vaccine if they had lived.

Sir Liam said this showed the "potential" of the vaccine to have an impact.

"We have not been through our entire flu season yet but the positive side of it is we have the vaccine and the opportunity to interrupt a further flow of deaths," he said.

He also urged people with symptoms to call the National Pandemic Flu Service — the telephone and internet service for England — as the number of people using it has fallen off recently.

"We think that is due to a lack of awareness and we are going to do more about that," he said.

Ian Dalton, the national director for flu resilience, said all GPs in England should have their first box of 500 doses of Pandemrix in the next three to four weeks.

It was "not a surprise" most GPs had not received doses yet, as delivery times were dependent on supplies being distributed from the manufacturer, GSK.

"It's the nature of running a vaccination programme of this type," he said.

Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish Health Secretary added: "Everyone must realise the importance of maintaining hygiene standards, and in seeking medical advice immediately if you believe you are at greater risk of suffering influenza complications.

"Vaccination is our best defence against this virus and I urge everyone who is in the priority groups to accept the vaccine when invited to do

so."

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/Swine_flu/article6896172.ece?print=yes&randnum=1257527191855