

11 September 2009

Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 “Swine Flu” – Information for Registrants

Great attention is being focused on the H1N1 Virus (swine flu) in relation to assessment, treatment and vaccinations for the general public. Vaccinations are an accepted mechanism in public health for the prevention and eradication of infectious diseases. It has been shown that vaccination rates amongst healthcare workers are low, but yet patients assume that healthcare workers will take all reasonable measures to ensure that their care is as safe as possible. All healthcare workers have a duty to deliver safe and effective care relating to the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases, including being vaccinated for influenza and thus avoiding harm to others. According to the HSE up to 25% of healthcare workers who contract influenza may be asymptomatic and that the transmission of infection to patients has been shown to be a key source of institutional mortality and morbidity. In addition many healthcare workers continue to work whilst unwell which leads to increased transmission to both their patients and colleagues.

There is an expectation from the public that safe and competent care is provided by dentists and dental professionals. This includes the recognition and active limitation of healthcare risks associated with disease transmission from person to person and adherence to infection control policies and standards. Dentists and dental professionals should be aware of their professional accountability as it relates to the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases.

Under the Dental Council Code of Practice “Professional behaviour and Dental Ethics”:
“The dentist has an obligation to protect his/her patients, his/her staff and himself/herself from the risk of cross infection in the dental surgery. “

The Dental Council therefore supports the request of the HSE to encourage all dentists and auxiliary dental workers to avail of vaccination programmes for healthcare workers.

Furthermore, the legislative provisions of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act (2005) and subsequent regulations of 2007 detail the responsibilities of both employers and employees as they relate to the safety, health and welfare of workers. Employers are required “as far as reasonably practicable” to protect the health and safety of their workers. Employees must also take reasonable care to protect their own safety, health and welfare and the safety, health and welfare of any other person who may be affected by those employees’ acts or omissions at work.

With the national and international information and best practice guidelines presented here the Dental Council is encouraging each registrant, dentist, dental hygienist, clinical dental

technician and dental nurse to reflect upon his/her own responsibilities to colleagues, employees and patients for health and safety in the work environment regarding vaccinations. The Dental Council supports the call that dentists and auxiliary dental workers should receive the seasonal influenza vaccine and vaccination against H1N1. It should be noted that the HSE have stated that all healthcare workers will be prioritised to receive 2 doses of the pandemic vaccine. The Dental Council is encouraging each dentist and auxiliary dental worker to reflect upon their own responsibilities within the community regarding vaccinations.

Information Sources

The Dental Council wishes to draw the following information sources to the attention of dentists and auxiliary dental workers regarding the H1N1 virus. Healthcare professionals and the general public can locate current data about the precautions, diagnosis and treatment (including medication management) from the following organisations:

- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/OralHealth/infectioncontrol/
This site contains extensive information regarding the spread of the H1N1 virus and a guidance document for dentists entitled "Prevention of Swine Influenza A (H1N1) in the Dental Healthcare Setting".
- World Health Organisation www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu
This site contains extensive material to facilitate education and development of guidance for individuals, communities, health care professionals and national authorities for dealing with the Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus. Best practice guidance documents are being added on a frequent basis.
- Department of Health and Children www.dohc.ie
The Department is regularly providing information about the current situation and national health care planning. The site also includes a frequently asked questions section updated daily.
- Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) www.hpsc.ie/hpsc
The Centre is part of the HSE and serves to disseminate information in forecasting and taking action to outbreaks of disease and significant situations occurring at regional, national and international levels.
- Health Service Executive (HSE) www.hse.ie
The HSE provides daily updates regarding the pandemic in various formats including questions and answers and information leaflets. It has also established a dedicated 24 hour telephone line for further information – 1800 94 11 00.