UK will reserve bird flu vaccine for health workers

H5N1 bird flu vaccine will be for the exclusive use of NHS staff and other key public workers, ministers in the United Kingdom have confirmed. Contracts were announced with Baxter International and Chiron Corporation for about 3.5 million doses of the jab.

Some experts have warned that British poultry workers might need the vaccine as the virus continues its move eastwards. Last week, H5N1 infection was confirmed in a turkey farm in France.

But after announcing that the two batches were scheduled to arrive in May and October 2006, health minister Rosie Winterton made it clear that the vaccine was for public workers.

"Building a stockpile will allow us to carry out more research [the vaccine] could be offered as a possible first line of defence for NHS workers while the exact vaccine to match the pandemic flu strain is manufactured," she said.

Michael Day London

US Supreme Court to review "partial birth abortion" law

The US Supreme Court has agreed to hear the government’s appeal of lower court rulings that prevented enforcement of a federal law banning “partial birth abortion,” the procedure in which a fetus is partially delivered to match the pandemic flu strain is manufactured,” she said.

"Building a stockpile will allow us to carry out more research and the vaccine could be offered as a possible first line of defence for NHS workers while the exact vaccine to match the pandemic flu strain is manufactured," she said.

John R. Graham Jr

Conceptions in England and Wales are falling in women under 18 but rising overall

The conception rate in girls aged 15-17 in England and Wales fell from 42.3 conceptions per 1000 to 41.7, between 2003 and 2004. But overall there was a 2.4% increase in estimated conceptions from 73.7 to 75.2 conceptions per 1000 women aged 15-44.

New figures from the Office for National Statistics, published in Health Statistics Quarterly, showed that the greatest increase in conception rate was seen in women aged at least 40; the rate increased by 6% from 10.7 to 11.3 conceptions per 1000 women aged 40-44.

Life expectancy at birth in the United Kingdom also increased by 5.1 years for men and 3.7 years for women between 1981 and 2005.


Roger Dobson Abergavenny

AMA develops measures of doctors’ performance

The American Medical Association (AMA) has agreed to government requests to develop evidence based measures of doctors’ performance in collaboration with groups representing medical specialties and the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

The association has convened the Physician Consortium for Performance Improvement to develop by consensus 140 evidence based measures of doctors’ performance in 34 clinical areas. The consortium includes representatives from more than 70 national medical specialty and state medical societies, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which administer the Medicare health insurance programme for elderly people and the Medicaid programme for children and people with low incomes.

Arguing that consumers can shop for most things apart from state funded health care, based on price and quality, the Bush administration is promoting “pay for performance” standards for healthcare providers to publicise how well they are doing and to link their performance to Medicare payments.

Janice Hopkins Tanne New York

Development of “orphan drugs” in Europe is too slow

The development in Europe of “orphan drugs” — drugs for serious but rare conditions—is progressing too slowly, a research study has found.

Of 255 products designated in four years by the European Union as “orphan drugs,” and therefore entitled to special grants, only 18 were eventually approved, say researchers in the British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology (2006;61:355-60). They say that the low rate may be at least in part because of a paucity of European funds for companies willing to develop orphan drugs, and they call for urgent action.

“There is an urgent need to establish programmes setting aside a special fund and providing tax relief for sponsors producing orphan medical products. The fact that it took four years to develop 18 drugs and that there are still several thousand rare diseases awaiting therapy is a public health issue that cannot be neglected,” they say.

Roger Dobson Abergavenny

More information about the Physician Consortium for Performance Improvement is available at www.physicianconsortium.org.