

# Community pharmacists to play major part in this year's influenza campaign

*Influenza vaccination is now a target under the Performance and Planning Framework. Each primary care trust is responsible for maximising vaccine uptake and they are enrolling more pharmacists to help. Hannah Pike finds out who is involved*

NEXT week the annual influenza vaccination campaign for England will be launched by the Department of Health. The national immunisation policy for influenza remains unchanged this year; influenza immunisation should be offered to all those aged 65 years and over, those living in long-stay residential and nursing homes or other long-stay facilities and all those aged over six months in an "at risk" group (chronic respiratory disease including asthma, chronic heart disease, chronic renal disease, diabetes or immunosuppression). This year the campaign, to be launched on 1 October, aims to achieve a national uptake of 70 per cent among people aged 65 years and over. No target has been set for immunising people in the disease-based "at risk" groups because reliable statistics on the size of this group are not available.

Influenza vaccination is now a target under the Performance and Planning Framework. The National Health Service in England will receive a total of £5m for the 'flu programme this year, the allocation of this to primary care trusts being based pro-rata on their population aged 65 years and over. Each PCT will be responsible for maximising vaccine uptake and for overall monitoring across their practices. During last year's national campaign more than half of PCTs achieved uptakes of 70 per cent or above, and it is hoped that this figure will be increased this year.

As in previous years, pharmacists will be called upon to display posters and provide information leaflets promoting the service to customers. However, PCTs are increasingly recognising the influence community

pharmacists can have on vaccination rates, and are initiating schemes accordingly.

For the second year running, East Elmbridge and Mid Surrey PCT are implementing a community pharmacy initiative to run alongside the national 'flu campaign. Gabrielle Clezy, the pharmaceutical adviser running the East Elmbridge and Mid Surrey PCT 'flu programme, says: "As part of the new NHS we must make the best use of the skill mix available to us and this places pharmacists and their staff high on the agenda for action. Their active involvement and willingness to take part is crucial to the success of the multidisciplinary PCT 'flu campaign of 2003."

The scheme, previously piloted by Blackpool PCT in 2001 (P7, 14 September 2002, p356), involves pharmacy staff using prescriptions, patient medication records and appropriate questioning to identify patients in the "at risk" groups who may not have had a 'flu vaccination this year. If the patient has not been immunised the pharmacist or member of staff would counsel the patient and help dispel any myths the patient may have. For example, some patients think the vaccine will cause 'flu or make them ill, or that 'flu is simply a mild illness. Patients who agree to visit their general practitioner or clinic are given a referral slip.

Last year, East Elmbridge and Mid Surrey PCT enrolled 24 pharmacies in the scheme, resulting in 243 referrals to the GP surgery for 'flu vaccinations. This year, 29 pharmacies have been enrolled with the programme which will run from 29 September to the week ending 3 November, to coincide with the Department of Health's national campaign. Mrs Clezy says: "This year pharmacists will not only record referrals as they did last year, but also the number of patients they engage in a 'flu discussion. This will indicate the real impact the community pharmacist has."

The pharmacies will be paid £200 for taking part in the six-week programme. Michael Line, pharmacy manager at Rissons Pharmacy, Claygate, is taking part for the second year running. He says: "Last year about 10 per cent of people questioned had not thought about 'flu vaccination or had not thought it applied to them. For example, young people with diabetes who had not considered themselves to be at risk.

"There are still a good number of people who need extra prompting rather than anonymous posters at a health centre."

Other PCTs piloting similar schemes this year include Liverpool and Derwentside. Liverpool PCT is incorporating



*Sir Henry Cooper, who has now become synonymous with 'flu vaccination, will again be the face of the Department of Health campaign*

its 'flu referral scheme with a campaign promoting self-management of upper respiratory tract infections and which aims to reduce the public expectation for an antibiotic. Janet Decamp, network pharmacist for Liverpool PCT says: "The 'flu and antibiotics campaign is the first phase of engaging and supporting community pharmacists in their public health role, part of the basic requirement of the new contract."

□ **Campaign materials** Campaign leaflets and posters have been sent to a number of community pharmacies. Further copies, available in several languages, can be ordered from the Department of Health on 08701 555 455.

## Main messages

The main messages of the Department of Health's influenza campaign 2003-04 are:

- 'Flu vaccination is available free of charge to everyone 65 years of age or over, or in one of the "at risk" groups
- While 'flu is an unpleasant experience for most people, it can be a serious illness for people in these two groups
- The 'flu vaccination is safe and effective and most people only experience minor side effects
- People should contact their GP to find out more and make an appointment

## Related campaigns

- The Department of Health has recommended that pneumococcal vaccination should also be promoted at this time (P7, 16 August, p201).
- On 1 October the Department of Health will also launch its annual "Keep Warm Keep Well" campaign. It is hoped pharmacists will tell patients about the free Keep Warm Keep Well winter guide and winter warmth advice line (tel 0800 085 7000) which provide advice on staying warm and information about the financial assistance available to people such as the elderly, families on income support and those with certain chronic health conditions.