

CIGNA Occupational Health Update H1N1 Influenza 30th November 2009

Current Situation

Worldwide

- Influenza activity in the Northern hemisphere may have peaked, although activity is variable regionally. Cases in Europe, e.g. France, are continuing to rise, but this is against a background of a smaller numbers of cases in the first wave. Case numbers in Canada have also continued to rise despite a “plateauing out” in the US. However, activity remains widespread in the US. 50 million doses of vaccine have been delivered. Vaccination is now likely to have had some role in decreasing the rise in cases.
- H1N1 remains the predominant virus.

UK

- Number of cases appears to have reached a plateau in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but is still increasing slowly in England. Overall, the numbers of individuals being admitted to hospitals has stabilised, but the number of under 5yrs have continued to increase. Evidence from the US continues to suggest children with asthma are a high risk group.
- The number of consultations with GPs has decreased, but still remains above that usual for this time of the year.
- In the UK, most disease continues to be mild. There have been 240 deaths. It would be expected for the number of deaths to rise after cases numbers plateau, because of the delay between onset of the illness and the unfortunate failure of treatment.

National Pandemic Service

- The Service continues to distribute Tamiflu to those meeting symptom criteria. The number of calls continues to decrease, a trend over the last few weeks.

Vaccination

- Vaccination of “at risk” groups continues and has been proceeding well. Vaccine continues to be delivered in a steady flow from both manufacturers and all GPs have received first batches. On current usage, vaccination of these groups will be completed by the end of the year.
- As a consequence of increasing numbers of children under 5 with severe illness, the UK Government is to prioritise children over 6 months and under 5 as the next group for vaccination.

Discussion

- The second wave of this pandemic appears to be plateauing in UK, but optimism that this signals the end of the wave should be restrained. We have not yet had a prolonged cold spell; ideal environmental conditions for influenza virus to spread. The illness still remains mild in most case, but young people in the age range 16-24 are more likely to get more severe symptoms than other groups.
- I still believe that on the current trend the peak may be now, but if colder weather arrives in the next 2-3 weeks, cases may rise again at Christmas/New Year.

Advice

- Hand hygiene remains the most important measure to control spread of the infection. All colleagues should wash their hands on arriving at work and when they get home – **as a minimum**. Normal hand hygiene before meals and after visting the toilet is appropriate.
- Enhanced cleaning of surfaces touched by customers, or colleagues who are off with influenza (and telephone hand sets), is appropriate.
- Employees who are presumed to have had influenza, should be allowed to return to work 24 hrs after fever has abated (as long as the fever reduction is not due to medication)

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30 November 2009