SEASONAL ‘FLU’ VACCINATION (2009)

The MRC will again be offering free influenza (‘flu’) vaccination to its employees during the course of 2009. ‘Flu’ is a highly contagious viral infection. It is seasonal in nature and occurs mainly in winter. Its symptoms can be debilitating and can include headaches, fever, chills and body aches which can last for several weeks. In some cases it can lead to bronchitis, pneumonia and other severe illnesses. ‘Flu’ vaccines are effective in preventing the infection, or in at least reducing its severity. Currently they are only available free of charge to people over 65 and those with certain health conditions.

The offer of free ‘flu’ vaccination extends to all MRC employees, where availability of the vaccine allows, on a ‘first come, first served’ basis. There is no compulsion on anyone to take advantage of this offer. Employees who operate key facilities or whose work brings them into contact with vulnerable groups may, however, wish to give particular consideration to the benefits of vaccination.

Timeframe and Availability
This scheme is being announced now because vaccines have to be ordered during the summer months so that employees can receive their ‘jab’ during the period September to early December 2009, the optimum time for vaccination to take place. Vaccinations will, in the main, be administered via a unit’s local occupational health service. To help MRC Units match supply with demand this year and in the future, you should respond to your unit’s announcement promptly if you wish to take advantage of this initiative.

What to do next...
If you wish to receive the ‘flu’ vaccine you should make this known at the time your Unit/Institute/Centre announces its arrangements. You should ensure you read all the information made available to you, including the question and answer sheet at annex 1, and any information given you by your Unit and occupational health physician.

For further information about ‘Flu’ see the Portal.
Q. What is Influenza or ‘flu’?
A. Influenza (‘Flu’) is a highly infectious viral disease which occurs mainly in winter. Its onset is usually sudden and its symptoms generally include fever, chills, painful muscles, headache, backache and coughing.

Q. Does the ‘flu’ vaccine work?
A. Although the vaccine is only designed to work against specific strains of ‘flu’, immunisation is one of the most effective health care interventions, and ‘flu’ vaccines have been highly effective in preventing the illness or substantially reducing its severity.

Q. How do you know what type of ‘flu’ to vaccinate against?
A. The World Health Organisation (WHO) monitors the spread of influenza viruses worldwide, and recommends which virus strains to include in the vaccine to combat the most likely prevalent strains.

Q. Will the ‘flu’ vaccine also prevent pandemic ‘flu’?
A. The seasonal ‘flu’ vaccine is not effective against a pandemic strain in its present form – no vaccine is. However, if a pandemic ‘flu’ virus was to strike people already suffering from another type of ‘flu’, the impact could potentially be greater and the ill-health affects much worse on people whose resistance had been weakened.

Q. Are there any side effects from the vaccine?
A. The influenza vaccine is usually well tolerated. There may be temporary soreness at the site of injection. Rarely, it can cause fever and muscle aches lasting up to two days. Very rarely it has been linked with Guillan-Barre syndrome.

Q. Can the vaccine cause ‘flu’?
A. No. Influenza vaccine contains no live virus and therefore cannot cause ‘flu’.

Q. Is there anyone who should not be given a ‘flu’ vaccine?
A. As the vaccine viruses are grown on eggs, people with severe allergy to hen eggs should not be given the vaccine. You should also inform the occupational health practitioner administering the vaccine if you are, or think you could be, pregnant or if you have had an infection or raised temperature over the past 7 days.

Q. When is the ‘flu’ vaccine administered?
A. As the ‘flu’ “season” is from November to March, the ‘flu’ vaccine is administered from late September through to early December.

Q. Where can I receive the ‘flu’ vaccine?
A. The ‘flu’ vaccine can only be administered by a registered occupational health practitioner and in most Units the vaccine will be made available through the local

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1 The Flu FAQ section in the Department of Health website has been referenced for this document: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PublicHealth/Flu/index.htm
2 For further information about this condition, see http://www.gbs.org.uk/index2.shtml
occupational health service. Your Human Resources Department or Unit Administrator will let you know the arrangements for administering the vaccine.

Q. How is the vaccine given?
A. The vaccine is injected into the muscle of your upper arm.

Q. Will I need to complete any forms?
A. Typically, an occupational health practitioner will ask you to complete a brief medical questionnaire and you will need to sign a consent form. Each occupational health provider may have a slightly different procedure in place.

Q. Is it free?
A. Yes, the cost of the vaccine and the administering fee are being met by the MRC.

Q. Will there be a qualifying period for new employees?
A. No. Subject to vaccine availability anyone in post at the time it is being administered is eligible.

Q. Can other members of my family receive the vaccination?
A. No. The ‘flu’ vaccine is only available to MRC employees. If you wish for members of your family to be vaccinated then you should contact your local GP.

Q. Will there be enough Vaccines for all MRC employees?
A. In most years there are shortages of supply. As a result, local occupational health providers will only have a limited stock. The vaccine will therefore be offered to employees on a first-come first-served basis, though priority may be given to employees operating key facilities or whose work involves contact with vulnerable groups (e.g. the elderly).

Q. How long will the vaccination cover me for?
A. The vaccine only provides protection for a maximum of a year because the antibody level decreases over time. Also, the influenza virus changes from year to year.

Q. If I would like the ‘flu’ vaccine this autumn, what do I need to do?
A. Look out for the information made available by your unit. Your unit will let you know the arrangements for registering your interest in a ‘flu’ jab.