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TO:

All Chief Executives in NHS Trusts in England,
All Chief Executives in Primary Care Trusts in England,
All Chief Executives in NHS Foundation Trusts in England,
All Chief Executives in Strategic Health Authorities in England

CC:

All Chairs in NHS Trusts in England,
All Chairs in Primary Care Trusts in England,
All Chairs in NHS Foundation Trusts in England,
All Chairs in Strategic Health Authorities in England
All Flu Lead Directors in Strategic Health Authorities in England
All Chief Executives in Local Authorities in England
Monitor
Care Quality Commission

23 July 2009

Dear Colleague,

A (H1N1) Swine Influenza: National Pandemic Flu Service launches today

I wrote to you on 16 July to explain our decision to stand up the National Pandemic Flu Service (NPFS). The Service has been launched in England today.

From today, people in England will be able to access swine flu advice and treatment through the Service. The NPFS is a new self-care service with online and phone access that allows you to assess your symptoms and access antivirals if required, or read advice on symptom-relief. This service is only intended for people who are ill with swine flu.

Those people with serious underlying illness, who are pregnant or whose condition suddenly worsens should consult their GP if they are concerned they have swine flu.

Parents or carers of children under the age of one should consult their GP straight away if they are concerned that the child may have swine flu.

In the first instance, the preferred option is that people should visit the NPFS website at www.direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu. This website will be available 24 hours a day, and is designed to identify the symptoms of swine flu and to provide authorisation to access antivirals. Two telephone lines are also available, and will be open from 8am – midnight. People should call 0800 1 513 513 for **information** and 0800 1 513 100 for **treatment**. A textphone number is available on 0800 1 513 200. People diagnosed with swine flu will be given an authorisation code that a 'flu friend' – a friend or relative who does not have swine flu – can use to pick up antivirals from a local Antiviral Collection Point (ACP).

It is anticipated that the launch of the NPFS will relieve some of the current pressures on the system – particularly in primary care and A&E – and will ensure that GPs can focus their efforts on treating patients with more serious symptoms, with all other patients being advised, and treated if appropriate, by the NPFS.

I am aware that some concerns have been raised in relation to the NPFS launch around potential vulnerable groups, the side effects of antivirals and abuse of the system.

To support vulnerable groups, we are working with organisations such as the Red Cross to meet the needs of people who may be isolated or otherwise find it difficult to identify a flu friend.

As is the case with many medicines, there are some known side effects of the antivirals, such as nausea in a small number of cases, and these may lessen over the course of the treatment. We are offering an information leaflet to all patients who are prescribed antivirals outlining any possible side effects and when they should be seeking additional medical advice.

We hope to minimise any potential abuse of the system by asking people to provide their personal details when they contact the NPFS. Additionally their flu friend will need to take personal ID as well as the patient's ID with them when they go to collect the antivirals. Guidance will state that a patient should only be authorised one prescription for antivirals, and that there will have to be very strong case for the issuing of any additional prescriptions.

You will shortly begin to see nationally placed press adverts to promote the NPFS. This material will be made available for local use by NHS communications leads to help ensure this consistency of message.

The Chief Medical Officer has written to GPs to provide them with advice and guidance around their role in relation to the NPFS, and David Nicholson, NHS Chief Executive, has similarly written to all NHS staff in England to inform them of the launch of the Service. A new section of the Department's website will now host all information and guidance for NHS professionals on pandemic flu. This information can be found at <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publichealth/Flu/Swineflu/InformationandGuidance/index.htm>. Your SHA Flu Lead Director should be able to answer any further queries that you might have as a result of this letter. Their contact details are at Annex A.

It remains the case that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland do not yet need to use the National Pandemic Flu Service. This situation is being kept under constant review and they will be able to opt into the Service as and when needed.

I want to also remind you that today, the Health Protection Agency publish their third weekly data briefing summarising the numbers of swine flu cases, hospitalisations and deaths. This information can be found each week on their website - www.hpa.org.uk.

I want to thank you again for the continued work of you and your teams to respond to the current situation. I do understand the pressure you have been dealing with and hope that this new service will go some way to relieving some of this.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Dalton
National Director of NHS Flu Resilience
Department of Health

Annex A

SHA Flu Lead Directors

SHA	Name	Title	Contact Details
South Central	John Newton	Regional Director of Public Health	John.newton@southcentral.nhs.uk 01635 275 502
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North East	Martin Wilson	NHS Flu Resilience Director	Martin.wilson@northeast.nhs.uk 0191 210 6426
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