

Flu's The Word!

So, the Department of Health has announced a major extension to the 'flu vaccination campaign to include all children over the age of two, and not just the at-risk groups. According to the story released by the BBC, to include this group would result in 11,000 fewer hospital admissions and 2,000 fewer deaths from 'flu each year, even if only 30% of the eligible children had the vaccination.

The existing groups offered the vaccination will continue as at present. However for the child and adolescent population, the vaccine will be administered by an intra-nasal spray called Fluenz.

Fluenz is manufactured by AstraZeneca and it will contain the same live attenuated virus strains, based on the official recommendation by the World Health Organisation for the annual 'flu season, as the standard injectable vaccinations.

AstraZeneca have been testing the system round the globe and the European Union granted the company marketing authorisation for use in patients 24 months to 18 years in 2011. It is understood that the Government has probably agreed the contract valued at £100,000,000 a year for vaccinations for the 9 million children. The actual cost of the vaccine is £14 (according to the BNF) but it will in all probability be discounted for the UK market.

The vaccination is achieved using the nasal spray by spraying 0.1 ml of the agent into each nostril. As with some other types of vaccine, it will not be suitable for children with severe egg allergy (it is grown on eggs) or with compromised immune systems.

In a press statement AstraZeneca has



said that it will not be prepared to start the contract until September 2014 and the Department has confirmed that it would be rolled out in that year.

This programme will result in the UK being the first country in the world to immunise all its children against the 'flu. It has not yet been agreed whether school nurses or GPs would be responsible for the bulk of the programme.

Certainly the logistics of vaccinating nine million children in six weeks is going to be very daunting. The nasal spray is not licensed for children under the age of two and, apparently, the effectiveness of other 'flu vaccines in young children is uncertain and so that group was excluded from the proposal.

So the country stands at the gateway of a big step forward in preventing disease particularly in the vulnerable young infants, older people and those with asthma, diabetes and heart disease through the extension of herd immunity.

That is certainly not to be sneezed at!

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