

Chief medical officer admits concern at spike in critical swine flu cases

Number of new diagnoses rises 50% in a week

Postal strike may delay patients' access to vaccine

Owen Bowcott and Severin Carrell

More than 100 people have died from swine flu and intensive care beds are filling up with victims, the government's chief medical officer revealed yesterday.

A sharp rise in the proportion of hospital patients needing critical care is a matter "of some concern", Sir Liam Donaldson admitted as he unveiled the national vaccination programme due to start next week.

High-risk patients and frontline health workers in hospitals will be the first to be inoculated from 21 October. More than 4m doses of Pandemrix will be delivered to GP surgeries the following week so that patients in priority groups can be given protective injections.

A national postal strike could disrupt the process severely, Donaldson warned, saying it could prevent doctors from sending out letters to vulnerable patients to invite them in for vaccination.

"We are worried about the postal strike," the chief medical officer said. "GPs need to send letters out to patients. [A strike] would be an extremely unwelcome piece of timing. We need to get people into GPs' surgeries to give them this life-saving vaccine."

There were about 27,000 new cases of swine flu last week, an increase on the 18,000 new cases in the previous week. There have now been 106 deaths in the UK connected to the virus: 83 in England, 15 in Scotland, four in Wales and four in Northern Ireland.

Two of the latest people to die were pregnant women, a group emerging as a particularly at risk in the outbreak.

David Salisbury, director of immunisation at the Department of Health, dismissed fears that the "adjuvants" - material added to the vaccine to boost the body's immune response - would harm pregnant women.

The Pandemrix vaccine, he said, would provide virtually immediate immunity and guard against a broader spectrum of flu viruses.

Freshly issued advice from the World Health Organisation yesterday confirmed that "the GSK [Pandemrix] vaccine has been licensed for use in pregnant women in Europe as of September 2009". Salisbury promised, however, to review the data.

There are 364 people in British hospitals with H1N1 swine flu, of whom 74 are in

intensive care. "This is the highest proportion [of hospital patients] needing critical care since this all began," Donaldson said. "Most of the time it's been around 12% or 13%. Now it's up to 20%."

"We are seeing more serious cases than before but no sign of any change in the virus. This is giving me some concern. There's a school of thought that when a flu virus is operating in the summer it's milder than when it's operating in the flu season without a change in the virus."

"We don't understand why. We are doing a more detailed study of hospital patients," Donaldson said.

The Ministry of Defence announced that 15,000 doses of the vaccine would be delivered to the 9,000 UK troops serving in Afghanistan.

"We can't afford to have soldiers off with flu if we can prevent that," said an MoD spokesman.

No cases have yet been reported among servicemen there. The Department of Health is reviewing whether any other groups should be deemed high-risk categories and given early vaccinations against swine flu.

Among the latest deaths was a pregnant teenager from southern Scotland, whose unborn child also died. The 17-year-old was being treated in a hospital in the Forth region.

Her death was the latest in a series in Scotland: four deaths were reported in one 48-hour period earlier this week.

Health officials in Wales said that a pregnant woman, aged 21, from Monmouthshire, died in intensive care after a planned caesarean section. Three deaths were reported in Wales in 24 hours. Six pregnant women have now died from the virus in the UK.

Another pregnant woman who contracted the virus, Sharon Pentleton, has given birth to a son at Crosshouse hospital in Kilmarnock. In July, when she was six months pregnant, she was airlifted from Ayrshire for highly specialised treatment in Sweden which oxygenated her blood outside her body.

Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish health secretary, yesterday urged pregnant women to take the new H1N1 vaccine to ensure they had "maximum protection" for themselves and their babies.

Vaccination schedule

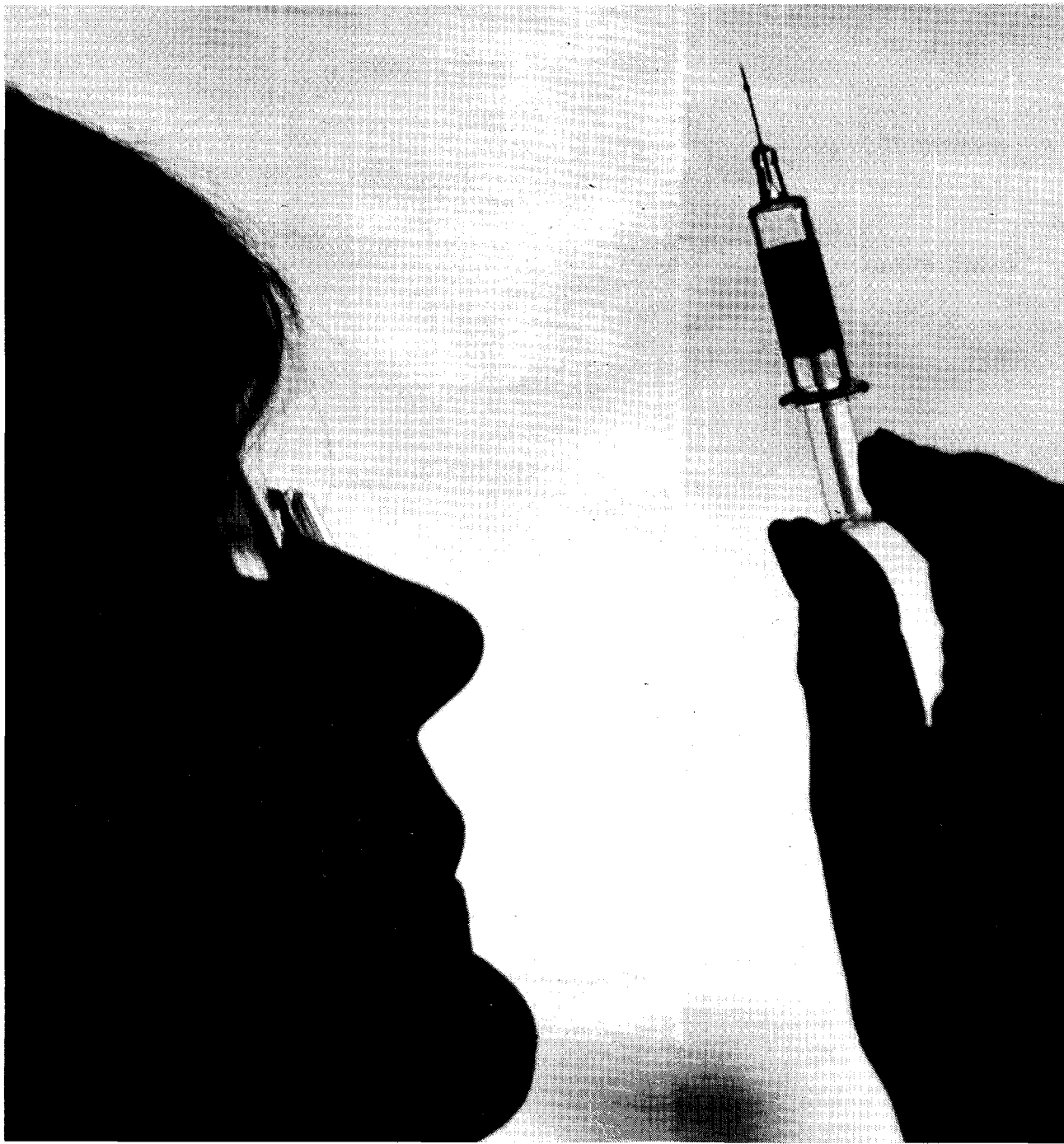
● **21 October** 415,000 doses of the vaccine Pandemrix will be given to high-risk patients in hospitals and to frontline health workers.

● **Week beginning 26 October** 4.4 million doses of Pandemrix to be delivered to GPs. Doctors will inoculate patients in priority groups - such as those with compromised immune systems and pregnant women.

● **At the same time** 236,500 doses of Pandemrix and 49,200 doses of another vaccine, Celvapan, will be sent to NHS primary care trusts.

● **The World Health Organisation** has backed the use of Pandemrix for pregnant women despite claims ingredients have not been sufficiently tested





Nurse Hazel Middleton prepares a flu vaccine jab at Davidson's Mains medical centre, Edinburgh Photograph: David Cheskin/PA