



Flu vaccination in challenging times

2020/21 marks the 10th season in which Irish community pharmacists have been involved in the HSE Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Campaign. In the midst of the current coronavirus pandemic, it is more important than ever that we ensure that all our at-risk patients receive a flu vaccination, writes Pamela Logan, Director of Pharmacy Services at the IPU.

Influenza and coronavirus

Influenza represents a large burden of disease worldwide and Ireland is no exception. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) reports that 4,289 patients were hospitalised with confirmed influenza during the 2019/20 influenza season¹. The Government's Chief Medical Officer and Chair of the National Public Health Emergency Team, Dr Tony Holohan, recently outlined the need to vaccinate early and

in more significant numbers for the upcoming 2020/21 influenza season, as we will be dealing with more than one significant respiratory viral infection at this time, posing a significant challenge for our health system. In his COVID-19 briefing on 15 April, Dr Holohan said, "One of the things we want to try to do is to greatly extend the flu vaccination programme



Table 1: NIO Flu Vaccine Distribution by Site 2011-2020

Site	2011/ 2012	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020	2019/ 2020 as % of total	% change since 2011/ 2012
GPs	637,900	630,650	643,516	649,890	643,500	687,208	762,900	783,341	810,169	72.3	27
HSE	36,780	35,680	41,290	44,850	44,690	56,503	73,050	90,340	107,843	9.6	193.2
Pharmacy	20,170	29,751	51,403	68,600	75,340	91,440	129,680	153,700	184,890	16.5	816.6
Other	7,650	3,580	5,650	6,040	6,060	6,418	13,130	15,450	17,477	1.6	128.4
TOTAL	702,500	699,661	741,859	769,380	769,590	841,569	978,760	1,042,831	1,120,379	100	59.5

and bring more people into the programme to receive flu vaccine than would normally receive it.” He also stated that he hopes to see a greater uptake amongst healthcare workers. We all need to do our part to keep flu out of hospitals and reduce pressure on the health system as it deals with coronavirus patients. The world is waiting with bated breath for a coronavirus vaccine; while we wait, let’s make use of a vaccine that we do have – influenza.

Flu vaccination grows in Irish community pharmacies

Last year, more flu vaccinations were delivered across all sites in Ireland than ever before – 1,120,379 vaccines in total – with

184,890 being delivered in community pharmacy, a 20% increase on the previous season. Pharmacy flu vaccinations now account for over 16% of the total flu vaccinations, with over 1,000 pharmacies now offering the service. Since pharmacists first started vaccinating in 2011, flu vaccine deliveries through the National Immunisation Office (NIO), as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, have increased overall by 59.5% and, within that, deliveries to GPs are up by 27%, demonstrating that when pharmacists vaccinate, public awareness increases, and vaccination rates increase.

Flu vaccination coverage in Ireland

In 2009, the EU Council recommended that Member States should reach a

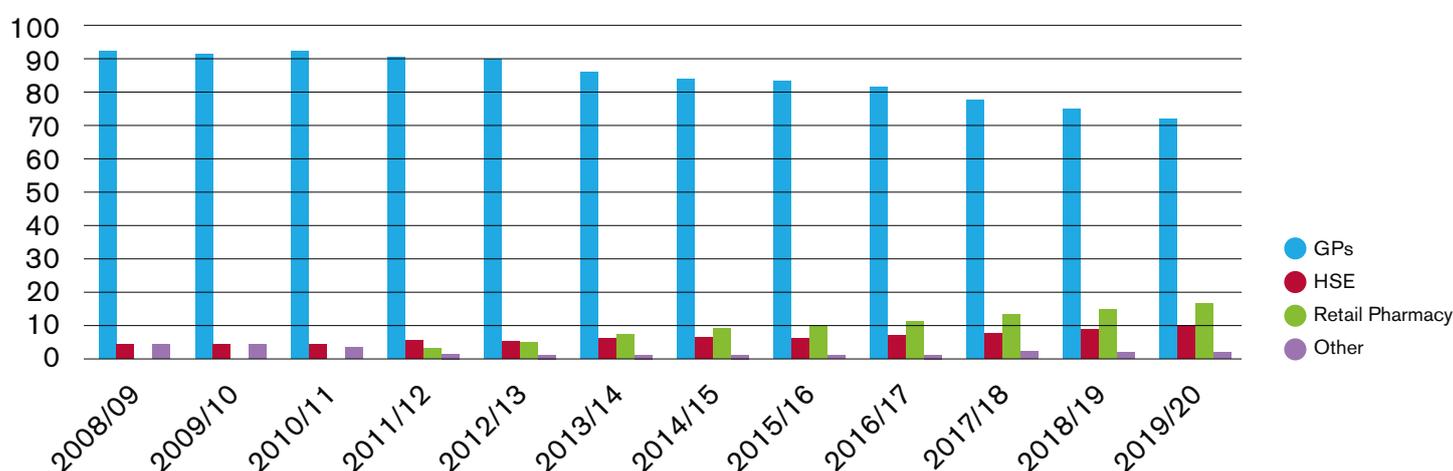
vaccination coverage rate of 75% by 2014/15 for persons 65 years and older, people with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women and young children and, also, that vaccination coverage among healthcare workers should be improved.

Data published by the HPSC in November 2019² showed that uptake of flu vaccination in persons aged 65 years and older was 68.5%. There was geographical variation in uptake, with the highest uptake reported in Community Health Office (CHO) 6 area (Wicklow, Dun Laoghaire and Dublin SE) at 84.5% and lowest in CHO 1 (Donegal/Sligo/Leitrim/West Cavan and Cavan/Monaghan) at 59.5%. At national level, those aged 75 years and older had the highest uptake (73.1%) and those aged 65-69 years

had the lowest at 58.3%.

This year, more than ever, it is vital that all healthcare workers, but especially those in hospitals, are vaccinated against influenza. At least 20% of healthcare workers are infected with influenza every year, many of whom continue to work despite being ill, increasing the risk of spreading flu to their colleagues and patients. During hospitalisation, patients are 35 times more likely to acquire influenza if exposed to infected patients or healthcare workers. Often, support staff do not think that they need the vaccine because they do not see themselves as healthcare providers. However, it is important that anyone who comes into contact with customers or patients is vaccinated against flu. As mentioned before, this is even

Figure 1: NIO Flu Vaccine Distribution by Site 2008-2020



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more important during the coronavirus pandemic.

There is an opportunity for community pharmacies to lead the way and protect patients by ensuring that all pharmacy staff are vaccinated against flu and by proactively prompting and encouraging all patients and carers coming into the pharmacy for any reason to also get their flu vaccination.

Why your pharmacy should offer a flu vaccination service

Last year, community pharmacists were able to vaccinate children 10 years and older (previously 18 years and older). This coming season, we will be able to vaccinate children from 6 months and older, thus enabling us to ensure maximum vaccination coverage for our at-risk

patients. For a universal vaccination programme to be successful, barriers to uptake must be identified and eliminated. For example, access to the vaccine must be made as simple as possible and it should be universally State-funded. The IPU has written to the Minister for Health, calling on Government to make Ireland the first country in Europe to advocate flu vaccination for everyone over the age of 6 months.

Community pharmacists have been at the forefront in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. If we are to reduce hospitalisations due to influenza, it would be great to see all community pharmacies in a position to do so to offer a pharmacy flu vaccination service this coming season. We can't stop coronavirus, but we can stop influenza.

References

1. <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/influenza/seasonalinfluenza/surveillance/influenzasurveillancereports/20192020season/>
2. <https://ndsc.newsweaver.ie/epiinsight/p9z35xyv7moimcmkeer4wk?a=1&p=55896974&t=17517774>

