

H1N1 Vaccine Set to Roll Out Early This Month

BY MITCHEL L. ZOLER

Vaccine against 2009 pandemic influenza A(H1N1) was expected to start reaching U.S. providers as soon as Oct. 2 based on the planned opening of the orders process on Sept. 30, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention official said at a meeting of the National Vaccine Advisory Committee.

This timetable applies to the vaccines

that received approval from the Food and Drug Administration Sept. 15, said Dr. Jay Butler, who heads the H1N1 vaccine implementation program for the CDC.

The U.S. government has arranged to purchase 194 million H1N1 vaccine doses, which will be supplied to the U.S. public at no charge for the vaccine (although there will be charges for ancillary materials), said Dr. Robin Robinson of the Biomedical Advanced Research and De-

velopment Authority of the Department of Health and Human Services.

During the first 2 weeks of September, 4% of visits to CDC sentinel providers of outpatient or emergency department care were for flu-like illness. That rate is as high as that seen in February 2009, the most recent peak of seasonal influenza in the United States. The new spike of flu cases has been most dramatic in states located in the southeastern United States.

The reason for this isn't known, but may relate to the earlier start of school in many communities in that region, said Dr. Anne Schuchat, director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

Based on recent data on immunogenicity, the new H1N1 vaccine will be administered to people aged 10 and older as a single dose, Dr. Schuchat said.

Until safety data from broad field use are available, the CDC must rely on the fact that the new H1N1 vaccines were made by the same methods that have

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DR. SCHUCHAT

been applied in past years to produce hundreds of millions of doses of seasonal flu vaccine, Dr. Schuchat said. This record of safety should be balanced against the clear health risk that H1N1 presents, a comparison that should convince most people to get immunized, she said. ■

Medicare Covers H1N1 Vaccine Administration

Medicare will cover administration of both the seasonal influenza vaccine and the vaccine against 2009 pandemic influenza A(H1N1) virus.

In a notice to physicians and other health care providers, officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said that the same billing rules will apply to the pandemic H1N1 vaccine and the seasonal vaccine. However, because the pandemic H1N1 vaccine will be provided at no cost by the government, Medicare will pay providers only for administration.

The CMS has issued two new billing codes to address H1N1 vaccine this season. Providers can use G9141 for pandemic influenza A(H1N1) immunization administration, including physician counseling of the patient and family. Payment for G9141 will be the same as that for the administration of the seasonal influenza vaccine.

The CMS also has created a billing code, G9142, for the pandemic influenza A(H1N1) vaccine itself. However, that code will not trigger payment. Nor will Medicare pay for an office visit when its sole purpose is administration of either seasonal influenza vaccine or pandemic H1N1 vaccine.

Private insurers are also planning to extend coverage to the pandemic H1N1 vaccine.

—Mary Ellen Schneider