

Swine flu pandemic now 'closer'

BBC NEWS

Health Minister Michael McGimpsey has given the first indication that a swine flu pandemic may be close.

Mr McGimpsey told the assembly there were currently enough anti-viral treatments available to cover half of the population in Northern Ireland.

He said if a pandemic was declared, government contracts with the vaccine manufacturer would be activated.

The number of cases in Northern Ireland stands at six. The first person diagnosed has fully recovered.

Mr McGimpsey said three other individuals were recovering well at home.

The latest two cases of swine flu were confirmed on Monday.

One male and one female returned separately from the USA, one from Florida and one from New York.

They are also being treated at home with anti-viral drugs and are said to be recovering well.

Mr McGimpsey said in recent days, the World Health Organisation had advised that the swine flu situation was getting closer to Phase 6 - where a pandemic is declared.

"It is not possible to state when this may happen but we are preparing for a possible announcement in the near future," he said.

Plans

"A move to phase six would be a serious development, but the World Health Organisation alert levels reflect the global view, and any action taken in the UK will need to be based on the situation here.

"Currently in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, we are following a containment strategy - supplying antivirals both to those who develop the disease and, as a preventive measure, to their close contacts.

"This strategy has been effective to date in delaying the spread of the disease, and buying us valuable time."

He said the numbers developing the disease will rise over the coming weeks.

"If the World Health Organisation move their pandemic alert to Phase 6 we will have access to two doses of pandemic vaccine for everyone in Northern Ireland, if they need them."

He said "robust plans" were in place if a school is affected by a case of swine flu.

Mr McGimpsey said a full set of tests for swine flu could now be carried out at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/8091201.stm

Previously, following initial tests in the RVH samples were sent to the national laboratory in London for final stage testing.

"The Northern Ireland swine flu helpline is 0800 0514 142.