05 November 2014

PHE Gateway number 2014-423

To: Chief Executives NHS Foundation Trusts
    Chief Executives NHS Trusts
    Accountable Emergency Officers - EPRR provider organisations
    CCG Clinical Leads
    NHS England Regional Medical Directors
    NHS England Area Team Medical Directors
    Local Authority Directors of Public Health

Cc: CCG Accountable Officers
    Chief Medical Officer
    NHS England Medical Director
    England.eprr@nhs.net

Dear Colleague,

Re: The use of antivirals for the treatment and prophylaxis of influenza


The key messages from the summary are:

- There is evidence that antivirals can reduce the risk of death in patients hospitalised with influenza;
- In the light of this evidence, it is important that doctors treating severely unwell patients continue to prescribe these drugs where appropriate;
- PHE continues to support the early use of antivirals for patients with proven or suspected seasonal influenza who are in high risk groups or who are considerably unwell, (even if not in a high risk group);

We have published this PHE summary following the 2014 Cochrane Review on the efficacy of antivirals in influenza. This review includes previously unpublished data, and adds to the evidence base for the treatment of influenza in some settings. However Cochrane Reviews consider evidence only from randomised control trials, which by
their nature are usually carried out in an otherwise healthy population in the community setting. The 2014 Review did not consider the substantial volume of observational data which has been gathered on the use of antivirals in the hospitalised population, which demonstrates a significant reduction in mortality, particularly when antiviral treatment is commenced early.

Although the findings of the 2014 Cochrane review were not substantially different to previous reviews, and there is no evidence to support a change to the existing guidance on the use of neuraminidase inhibitors, media reporting around the Cochrane Review 2014 publication suggested that antivirals are not effective for influenza. This may impact the prescribing of these important drugs.

It is essential that physicians treating severely unwell patients in any setting are not deterred from prescribing what may be lifesaving drugs as a result of confusion over efficacy in this situation; this is especially true for patients hospitalised with proven or suspected influenza.

As we approach the influenza season, we ask you to take steps to ensure there is clarity amongst local teams on current guidelines on, and the appropriate use of, antiviral drugs to ensure all appropriate influenza patients receive them.

Yours sincerely

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Further information

7. Link to NICE guidance on Amantadine, oseltamivir and zanamivir for the treatment of influenza.