

## Government scraps swine flu vaccination campaign for under fives

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By Ian Quinn

The Department of Health has revealed it is to scrap plans for healthy children under five to continue to be vaccinated against swine flu, just three months after urging GPs to vaccinate more than three million youngsters against the outbreak.

In a major U-Turn, the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, revealed the programme of vaccinating healthy children would wrap up at the end of next month, although GPs have been told to continue to try to vaccinate children until then.

Extending the vaccination campaign to children has proved a disappointment, with just 17% of children in England having had the vaccine according to the latest uptake figures.

GP leaders blamed protracted negotiations with the Government, which refused to provide concessions on GP workload via a national deal, for the lack of uptake in a campaign which ended up being launched as a hugely patchwork and bitter set of local arrangements between PCTs and GPs.

The move to scrap child vaccination against swine flu will also be seen as vindication by many GPs, with the majority of respondents to a Pulse poll in December claiming that it was a waste of NHS resources.

A spokesperson for the [Department of Health](#) said: 'The programme was extended to young healthy children because more people in this age group were hospitalised.

'We want to ensure that the NHS has the opportunity to complete this programme of work so that all children in this age group can have the vaccine if their parents and carers wish.

'Following advice from JCVI, and given the low levels of swine flu virus circulating, the risk from the virus is lower for young children than the clinical risk groups so we will not be extending that part of the programme beyond the end of March.'

It means GPs have an impossible task of vaccinating more than 2.5 million children in just over a month, with only 518,000 doses having been given to healthy children to date.

Dr Dean Marshall, a GPC negotiator on swine flu, said: 'I believe the take up of the vaccine among children would have been much greater had we not wasted several weeks in negotiations with the Government which meant the campaign did not get under way until after Christmas, by which time fears over the illness had lessened.'

The Government also revealed that just 32% of all target groups had been vaccinated in England, which confirms Pulse's predictions that the vast majority of GPs will fail to receive reduced thresholds in this year's patient survey, after the GPC's national deal based on vaccination of at risk groups aged between 5-65.

Sir Liam revealed overall figures for vaccination take up were far worse in England than other parts of the UK and elsewhere in Europe, adding: 'We continue to receive anecdotal accounts of people not being aware of their need and entitlement for vaccination or believing that vaccination clinics are unavailable.

It would be really helpful if you [GPs] were able to check whether awareness and access to the vaccine is high in your practice. That way we can ensure that this important protection is widely in place.'

Read the letter from Sir Liam Donaldson [here](#).