

Minister for Public Health and Sport
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Margaret Mitchell MSP
Convener
Equal Opportunities Committee
Room T3.40
Scottish Parliament
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Dear Margaret

I am writing to you about two important issues following my appearance at the Equal Opportunities Committee on 1 December 2009 and in response to your letter of 15 December 2009.

First, your letter refers to a further debate in Parliament on unpaid carers after publication of the Carers and Young Carers Strategy for Scotland. It is our intention to publish the strategy later this year. I shall certainly consider the options for a full debate in Parliament at a suitable juncture after publication and will keep you informed on this point.

I would also like to take this opportunity to advise you of further developments with regard to the H1N1 vaccination programme since my appearance at the Equal Opportunities Committee. You may recall that I provided advice regarding carers and swine flu vaccination in response to a question from Christina McKelvie. The advice that I gave, in good faith and based on the epidemiological advice at the time, indicated that carers across the UK would be included in phase 2 of the vaccination programme.

As you will appreciate this has been a swift moving area. As you may be aware from announcements on 18 February, we have now decided, across the UK and based on the current epidemiology in line with recommendations from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation that there is no scientific justification to extend the programme further to offer vaccination to any additional groups other than those already prioritised in the initial phase one at risk groups and to children under 5 in the phase 2 group. This effectively means that carers will not be immunised, unless they are otherwise within priority groups, for example if they are a frontline health worker too. Given the way that the pandemic has declined recently, this may not come as too much of a surprise to you.

If the situation should change in relation to the epidemiology then carers would of course be considered again for vaccination. However, we will be undertaking further marketing of the seasonal flu vaccine for carers in winter 2010 – this year's vaccine will include a H1N1 component, as agreed by the World Health Organisation.

We have advised the National Carers Organisations, who were very co-operative and helpful when we were seeking views on the definition of carer for the programme, of this development so that they knew in good time prior to the public announcement on the vaccination programme made last week.

I am sure you will understand the position and reasoning for this decision about carers.

I am copying this letter to Christina McKelvie who raised the question at Committee.

Best wishes,
Shona.

SHONA ROBISON