19th September 2018

To: Managers of nursing and residential homes and hospices

Dear Matron / Manager

WINTER READINESS

We are writing ahead of the approaching winter, to assist you in preparing for the season in order to reduce the spread of infection and disruption to your services.

The guidance documents are available on the following website: https://www.england.nhs.uk/south/info-professional/public-health/infection-winter/

Care home residents and staff in long-stay residential care homes are particularly susceptible to infections which increase over the winter months, including seasonal influenza (flu) and gut infections (such as norovirus). These infections spread easily and cause outbreaks in residential settings due to the close contact between residents and staff. However, the impact can be reduced by following the advice provided and by adopting good infection control practices.

Flu, in particular, can cause serious illness (including death) in elderly care home residents. Last winter season there were 307 outbreaks of Influenza-like-illness (ILI) in the SW, of which 89% were in care homes.

It is important not to delay recognition and reporting of outbreaks to the Health Protection Team (HPT) so that we can support you by ensuring appropriate management and public health action to reduce the likelihood of further spread.

A PHE audit of outbreaks from last winter season showed that there was often delay in reporting of outbreaks to the HPT. Although 46% (of 114 outbreaks) were reported to the HPT within 3 days, and a further 27% within a week, 12% were not reported until at least 2 weeks after the onset of the outbreak.

It is also important to note that flu in the elderly can often be mistaken for primary bacterial chest infections and then treated inappropriately with antibiotics. Out of 78 laboratory confirmed outbreaks audited, at least 55 were initially treated by GPs as primary bacterial infections. It is often the care home which has oversight of several different patients from different general practices being treated for bacterial chest infections. If this is the case, the care home should think of flu and should call the HPT.

We have developed a number of documents that we hope will help you prepare for the forthcoming season, avoid illness in residents and staff and minimise disruption to your services.
The key messages are:

1. **Be prepared** – go through the attached checklists for flu and norovirus and ensure you are prepared in terms of infection control procedures and vaccination – influenza, pneumococcal and shingles

2. **Recognise outbreaks** – the Care Home Pack will give you information on how to recognise outbreaks. You should be particularly aware of influenza and norovirus/gastroenteritis in the forthcoming winter season.

3. **Report outbreaks** to your local health protection team seven days a week

   Tel: 0300 303 8162 Option 1 (Health Protection).

Please have at hand:
- Numbers of affected residents and staff
- Date of onset of the first and most recent case
- Signs, symptoms and duration of symptoms
- Locations of affected cases, e.g. one wing or all areas are affected
- Any hospitalised or deceased cases
- Details of any samples taken

**Hospital transfers:**
Please do not transfer patients/residents if they have gastroenteritis or flu or you have an outbreak in your home unless it is absolutely necessary. If a patient/resident needs to be transferred to hospital, please let the ambulance and admitting ward know that there is an outbreak in the home. They can then take precautions to prevent spread in the hospital and minimise the impact on the health and social care system.

We would greatly appreciate it if you could make your staff aware of the information in this pack and also forward the information on to the agencies that provide you with temporary staff.

We thank you for your support in helping to avoid further spread in the community.

If you have any queries about this letter please contact your PHE Centre.

Yours sincerely

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Consultant in Health Protection

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Consultant in Public Health
Documents have all been updated since last year and are available on: 
https://www.england.nhs.uk/south/info-professional/public-health/infection-winter/

They include:

- A toolkit for maximising influenza vaccination in care homes
- A template for recording staff flu vaccination
- Checklists for flu and norovirus preparedness in care homes
- The PHE SW HPT “Care Home Pack” – a guide to IPC, common infectious diseases and recognition and management of outbreaks
- National guidance for care homes on IPC
- National guidance on managing norovirus in care homes
- Information leaflet on flu for health and social care staff
- Outbreaks of flu in care homes poster
- Stop Norovirus Spreading poster
- Hand hygiene poster