

STATEMENT BY THE GSLP/LIBERAL OPPOSITION

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The statement by the Government which was critical of the Opposition's comments regarding priorities for vaccination against swine flu has completely missed the point. The point is that it was the European Union Health Security Committee and the Early Warning and Response authorities who have recommended that such prioritisation take place and listed the groups that they regard most at risk and who should receive the vaccine first.

It is wrong and totally inappropriate for the Government to use swine flu as if it were a political football. This is a serious issue where people need to be kept as informed and as up to date as possible with what is happening at a global, a European and a local level. Indeed, in its own statement the Government accepts that handling the matter effectively "involves continuing to issue public guidance, advice and information". However, in the same breath they have refused to supply such information in relation to the vaccination of priority groups even though they say that this information is available to them in the "vaccination Plan which already forms an existing part of the Gibraltar Pandemic Influenza Contingency Plan".

Moreover, even though the Government have ordered enough vaccines for the entire population, it is logical to assume that these cannot all be administered at once and that vaccination, should this become necessary, has to take place in a certain order presumably with health workers and those who are most at risk being vaccinated first and others later. The size of Gibraltar's population and the number of cases made public so far are therefore an irrelevant consideration to the publication of the priority groups for vaccination.

The Opposition had already acknowledged in our original statement that the diagnosis and treatment of swine flu in Gibraltar is different from what has happened in other parts of the world. Therefore it is not a case of anyone ignoring the facts and the best medical practice as they affect Gibraltar. On the contrary, the reality is that it is the Government that appears to be burying its head in the sand as if they knew it all and not giving due consideration to learning from what is happening elsewhere.

In the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland has already made public its vaccination priorities, showing which groups are most at risk and will be vaccinated first. In Gibraltar, the Government prefers to keep this information secret for reasons which are not convincing.

In Northern Ireland as at last week there were a total of 189 confirmed laboratory cases of swine flu in a population of around 1.7 million people. This is one case in about every 8994 people. In Gibraltar the latest available information is that there have been 12 confirmed cases. This is one case in about every 2500 people. This makes the incidence of swine flu per capita higher in Gibraltar than it is in Northern Ireland, and despite this the Government here has refused to release details of the priority groups for vaccination.

Commenting on the matter, Shadow Minister for Health Neil Costa said:

“The latest European Union data shows that the highest number of deaths as a result of swine flu have happened in the United Kingdom and Spain. In the UK (including some OT’s) there have been 13322 confirmed cases and 76 deaths and in Spain 1538 cases and 25 deaths. Given that these are the countries with which Gibraltar has more contact through air communications and through the land frontier, it is only logical that the Opposition should seek to establish what the vaccination priorities will be in Gibraltar.”

ENDS