

News release



21 November 2005

AVIAN FLU

The risk of an Avian Flu pandemic has received much media attention lately. In response to the public's concern about this matter, the Southern Health & Social Services Council (SHSSC), which was set up to represent the views and opinions of the public to those who plan, provide and manage health and social care services, invited Dr Vinod Tohani, Director of Communicable Diseases with the Southern Health & Social Services Board to address their November meeting on this topic.

Dr Tohani told the SHSSC that whilst there was currently a lot of anxiety about Avian Flu, the public should not worry unduly and they need to balance these concerns against other health risks such as influenza. He added, that, whilst Avian Flu does appear to be contagious within birds, there have been very few transmissions to humans and where these have occurred, they have been as a result of close contact with live infected birds. The main concern related to Avian Flu is the possibility that the present situation could give rise to another global influenza epidemic (pandemic) in humans. Scientists know that avian and human influenza viruses can exchange genes when a person is simultaneously infected with viruses from both species. This could give rise to a new

subtype of the influenza virus to which few, if any humans would have a natural immunity.

Speaking after the meeting, Mrs Lynne Cairns, Chairman of the SHSSC, said, "The Council was very pleased to hear of the detailed plans being laid down by the DHSSPS and the Southern Board to ensure a swift response should we be faced by an influenza pandemic. One key message from Dr Tohani was that the key to fighting any infection is to prevent disease transmission. Simple steps such as hand washing, using a handkerchief, staying at home if you are unwell, all have an important part to play."

With regard to future action, Mrs Cairns added, "The SHSSB has established a multi-disciplinary group to develop a Board wide pandemic plan. The Council was delighted to be invited by Dr Tohani to join this group. We hope that through this mechanism we will be able to reflect public concerns on this topic to the planners and providers of healthcare services."

Ends

Notes to Editors:

- **The Southern Health and Social Services Council is one of 4 Health and Social Services Councils set up in 1991 to represent the views of patients and users of the health and social services. The Council has a total of 24 members, 40% of whom are nominated by District Councils in the Southern Area. The remainder are appointed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety – 30% voluntary/community representatives and 30% are nominees with an interest in health and social care.**
- **Health and Social Services Councils have a right to be consulted by Health and Social Services Boards about and plans for development of services, or where significant changes are being considered. Councils play an important part in representing the views of consumers of services to the decision makers, and provide advice and support to patients and service users in relation to complaints procedures.**

If you require any further information please contact :

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