

**WRITTEN QUESTION TO THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES  
BY DEPUTY G.C.L. BAUDAINS OF ST CLEMENT**

**ANSWER TO BE TABLED ON TUESDAY 4th DECEMBER 2007**

**Question**

- (a) In view of recent media coverage relating to influenza prevention and treatment that some may have found confusing would the Minister clarify the situation by informing members whether –
- (i) Tamiflu and Relenza are antivirals, not vaccines, and need to be taken within 48 hours of the start of the illness to be of any use?
  - (ii) Tamiflu and Relenza are primarily for use against Influenza type A and B, and whether their efficacy against avian ‘flu has been quantified?
  - (iii) a vaccine to protect against avian ‘flu is currently available?
- (b) Given that drugs which fight the influenza virus, such as Tamiflu and Relenza, need to be taken at the onset of symptoms in order to be effective, would the Minister agree to implement Dr. Laver’s (the ‘flu vaccine co-founder) advice and make the anti-virals available ‘over the counter’ in the event of a major outbreak locally, thereby saving valuable time otherwise lost whilst patients wait for a doctor’s appointment to get a prescription?

**Answer**

It strikes me that there may be some confusion in the minds of the lay public about the three different types of flu which have been topical in recent times: seasonal flu, avian flu and pandemic flu. I have added definitions at the end of this answer for ease of reference.

- (a) (i) I can confirm that Tamiflu and Relenza are antiviral drugs and not vaccines. These drugs must be taken within 48 hours of the onset of flu symptoms if they are to have an effect. The Medical Officer of Health, Dr Geller, has advised me that for antiviral drugs to be optimally effective, for treating pandemic flu, she would like to see patients taking Tamiflu within hours and the sooner the better.
  - (ii) Avian influenza is a type A influenza virus (H5N1). Tamiflu and Relenza are considered effective if given early. They reduce the severity of the illness and can prevent death in this, the most severe form of flu ever seen in man. We have stockpiled Tamiflu for use against pandemic flu which is likely to be a variant of the H5N1 avian flu virus.
  - (iii) A human vaccine has been manufactured which protects against avian flu. The potential of this vaccine to save lives, however, is that it is predicted to offer some protection against any H5 variety of flu. The World Health Organisation is currently on pandemic alert as bird flu has passed into humans and they predict it is only a matter of time before this H5N1 virus variety can pass between people easily through coughs, sneezes and secretions, thus causing a worldwide flu pandemic.
- (b) Dr. Laver made his comments in the light of a seasonal flu outbreak in Australia. Our stock of Tamiflu is largely reserved for treating the more severe - pandemic flu. There remain some concerns about inappropriate use and side effects if available over the counter. I would also be concerned about drug resistance and therefore that the drugs could become less effective for when we really need them: **in a pandemic.**

NB In answering the above questions, I have restricted my answers to the role of Tamiflu in the event of a flu pandemic. There are three types of flu that people frequently refer to. Each of these have different implications for individuals, populations and health care planning -

- (i) **Seasonal Flu** - we see this every winter. It can cause varying degrees of illness in either a few individuals or in large numbers depending on the year. Currently we help to protect ourselves against this with the annual season-specific influenza jab for people over 65 and those with a chronic health problem.
- (ii) **Avian Flu** - this is a flu that affects birds. There are many different types but at the moment people usually use this term to refer to the H5N1 strain that is affecting birds around the world and that can be highly pathogenic to poultry. It is rarely transmitted to man with just some 300 cases noted in the last 10 years. However when man acquires this infection he develops a severe illness and this is what makes this type of flu a matter of particular concern.
- (iii) **Pandemic Flu** -this is a severe flu due to a new virus to which no one has immunity and which can spread rapidly from person to person- hence the term pandemic - an epidemic that effects the whole world. There have been three pandemics in the last 100 years in 1918, 1957 and 1968. We are therefore due another one at any time. While we cannot be certain which viral strain will cause this pandemic, H5N1 avian flu looks likely. Experts predict that if it is an H5N1 derived strain that it will cause a more severe illness and higher death rate than that seen during the last three pandemics.