GDC issues swine flu advice

The General Dental Council has issued advice to dental professionals, after the World Health Organisation declared a global flu pandemic following an emergency meeting.

The UK’s Health Departments have also issued detailed advice and guidelines.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) director general, Dr Margaret Chan said: ‘We have evidence to suggest we are seeing the first pandemic of the 21st century.

However, she added: ‘Moving to pandemic phase six does not imply we will see increased in deaths or serious cases.’

A pandemic is declared on geographical terms as the virus spreads.

The swine flu (H1N1) virus first emerged in Mexico in April and has since spread to 74 countries.

Official reports say there have been nearly 30,000 cases globally and 141 deaths, with figures rising daily.

There have been more than 1,500 cases in the UK and Britain recently saw its first death from the virus, after a 58-year-old mother who had given birth prematurely, died in Glasgow.

She was said to have underlying health problems.

The Government has been stockpiling antivirals such as Tamiflu and has ordered vaccine, some doses of which could be available by October.

There is some concern that the virus may mutate and become more virulent during the colder months of winter.

In a statement, the General Dental Council (GDC) said: You may be asked to provide treatment at specialist centres, to continue providing treatment to non-symptomatic patients in your practice and/or to take part in other forms of healthcare delivery.

As a healthcare professional, you should act ethically in this difficult situation. GDC guidance emphasises your professional duty to put patients’ interests first, taking into account your health and safety commitments to your teams.

If you are asked to do something which is outside your normal area of practice, you need to be sure that you are competent to do it and check that you are covered by indemnity.‘

However, it also warned: ‘As health professionals, you should not let your own state of health put patients’ interests at risk. If you become unwell you should follow appropriate advice including any local measures which may be in place.’

The Department of Health (DH) has also issued its own guidance and has advised dental professionals that all patients should be screened for symptoms of flu before attending the practice by telephone and on arrival at the practice.

Treatment of infected patients should be limited to pain relief and should avoid aerosol-generating procedures where possible and infected patients should be segregated from well patients.

Where infected and well patients are in the same practice, a separation by space and/or time is essential.

Good general hygiene measures are of prime importance in containing the infection.

The DH also warns that in England and Wales, dentists may fail to deliver their contracted number of Units of Dental Activity.

The guidance recommends that contractual payments continue with no penalties if providers have done everything within their powers to comply.

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