



**10 August 2009**

## **Swine flu vaccine trial for children**

A pandemic H1N1 swine flu vaccine trial began today at The Children's Hospital at Westmead.

NSW Minister for Health, John Della Bosca, said around 100 healthy children aged between 6 months and eight years will be recruited for the study.

"They will be among 400 children recruited across five states for the trials of the vaccine produced by Australian biopharmaceutical company CSL," the Minister said.

"A trial testing the vaccine in adults has already begun," he added.

Director of Clinical Research at the National Centre for Immunisation, Research and Surveillance (NCIRS), Professor Robert Booy, said the trial was testing the appropriate dosage and safety of the vaccine in children, because the immune system of a child is less developed than an adult.

"Although the H1N1 virus is mild in the majority of the population, it predominantly affects young people and it is capable of causing severe illness in both fit and healthy children and adults," Professor Booy said.

"The vaccine is similar to the one used to prevent seasonal flu, except the strain has been updated to the H1N1 virus-causing swine flu.

"The clinical trial is to establish whether a dose equivalent to a standard dose of seasonal influenza vaccine will be protective against this new strain.

"Occasionally, with new influenza strains that spread rapidly, the human immune response to the standard dose of influenza vaccine is inadequate to provide protection against the flu and a higher dose is required."

Mr Della Bosca said children involved in the trial will be given two doses of the vaccine three weeks apart.

"Researchers are hoping to have results on dosage levels by next month, with the vaccine ready for distribution as early as October," the Minister said.

"The Children's Hospital at Westmead is taking a leading role in research on the surveillance and treatment of human swine flu as well as its prevention.

"Three surveillance studies and two treatment studies are also underway, in addition to the vaccine trial."

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The Minister has also used the opportunity today to view the latest technology for swine flu testing at the nearby Institute for Clinical Pathology and Medical Research (ICPMR) laboratories at Westmead Hospital.

“The NSW Government has invested \$180,000 in the latest laboratory testing equipment to help its highly trained staff meet the demand for swine flu testing at the ICPMR,” Mr Della Bosca said.

The equipment includes:

- High-volume nucleic acid extractor;
- Molecular biology liquid handling robot;
- Thermal cycler; and
- Ultra low freezer.

The head of the Westmead Influenza laboratory, Professor Dominic Dwyer, said the ICPMR laboratories at Westmead were the first to develop the process for testing for the swine flu virus in NSW and these methods are used by many laboratories throughout the state.

“Scientists at the laboratory diagnosed the first case of swine flu in NSW,” Professor Dwyer said.

Mr Della Bosca commended the ICPMR staff, particularly during this time of high demand for flu testing.

“ICPMR staff have completed more than 10,000 flu-related tests in the past three months, that’s three times the average annual rate for influenza testing,” the Minister said.

“The new equipment automates the process of extracting some of the influenza molecules from swab samples, effectively doubling the laboratory’s ability to process flu tests,” he added.

Professor Dwyer said to make the virus easier to detect, the equipment was also used to amplify the extracted influenza RNA (Ribonucleic Acid) molecules.

“The usually spherical H1N1 virus is so tiny it can only be seen with the help of a highly powerful electron microscope,” Professor Dwyer said.

Mr Della Bosca said the NSW Government’s investment in the equipment at ICPMR highlights its continued commitment in funding the latest technology to help the public hospital system’s hard working staff provide the best treatment for people in the community.