
CORRESPONDENCE

Composition of influenza vaccine for the southern hemisphere winter, 1996

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The latest edition of the Schedule of Pharmaceutical Benefits (effective from 1 February 1996), includes two distinct entries under the title 'Influenza Vaccine' which differ in terms of the specific strains included in the formulation.

FLUVAX and XFLU (both manufactured by CSL Limited) include A/Texas/36/91, A/Johannesburg/33/94 and B/Beijing/184/93-'like' strains, while VAXIGRIP, manufactured by Pasteur Merieux Serums & Vaccins and distributed in Australia by Rhone-Poulenc Rorer contains A/Texas/36/91, A/Guangdong/25/93 and B/Harbin/07/94-'like' strains.

Pharmacists, general practitioners and State Health authorities have expressed concern at the availability of the two formulations, and have sought advice from the WHO Collaborating Centre for Influenza Reference & Research and the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services to clarify which formulation would provide the best protection against strains of influenza virus likely to circulate in the Australian community this coming winter.

The composition of vaccine to be issued in Australia each winter is decided by the Australian Influenza Vaccine Committee (AIVC). This committee met in September 1995 and reviewed the serological and epidemiological data concerning the distribution and prevalence of influenza strains circulating in both northern and southern hemispheres during the preceding months. It also reviewed WHO recommendations for the composition of vaccines to be used in the north-

ern hemisphere in the current winter. The AIVC recommendation on the Australian formulation for 1996, based on this information, is shown in the box.

Southern winter influenza vaccine formulation

- an A/Texas/36/91 (H₁N₁)-like strain,
- an A/Johannesburg/33/94 (H₃N₂)-like strain, and
- a B/Beijing/184/93-like strain.

These are reference or 'type' strains. During its deliberations, the AIVC endorsed the use of the H₃N₂ strain A/Guangdong/25/93 as an alternative to A/Johannesburg/33/94 in the production of the vaccine as the two strains are antigenically equivalent (ie they share the same antigenic structure).

The AIVC also endorsed the use of B/Harbin/07/94 (the B strain used in northern hemisphere vaccines this winter) and B/Wellington/09/95 as acceptable alternatives to the B/Beijing/184/93 strains. Again, these strains are antigenically equivalent to B/Beijing/184/93 and are therefore regarded as B/Beijing/184/93-'like' strains.

Thus the three available influenza vaccines FLUVAX, XFLU & VAXIGRIP represent equivalent formulations and all three would be expected to provide good protection against influenza strains predicted to circulate in Australia this coming winter.