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## **EXPERTS RECOMMEND WHO STOCKPILE UP TO 150 MILLION DOSES OF AVIAN FLU VACCINE**

The Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on immunization (SAGE) has recommended that the World Health Organization (WHO) build a stockpile of up to 150 million doses of H5N1 influenza vaccine. One third of the doses will be reserved to help contain an initial human outbreak, should H5N1 attain the ability to transmit from human to human. Two thirds of the doses will be reserved to help low and middle income countries fight a pandemic should it be caused by H5N1.

WHO announced in May that it would build a stockpile of vaccine against the H5N1 strain of avian influenza circulating in Asia after SAGE concluded that the virus posed a significant enough threat of sparking an influenza pandemic to warrant a stockpile. The Group said the vaccines should be used to help countries without influenza vaccine production capacity or the ability to buy national stockpiles. Since then, several vaccine manufacturers have pledged contributions to the stockpile.

The latest recommendation of the 15 SAGE experts, who met last week in Geneva under the auspices of WHO, represents the first time the Group has quantified how many doses of vaccine should be in the stockpile and how they should be used.

"An international pandemic influenza vaccine stockpile is an intervention tool for global benefit. It could help stop or delay a pandemic, or if a pandemic caused by H5N1 appears imminent, it could allow vaccination of some people whose function would be deemed essential in low and middle income countries," said Professor David Salisbury, Chairman of SAGE and Director of Immunisation, Department of Health, United Kingdom.

"No country, however, should be overly dependent on the WHO stockpile, for which supplies will be limited," he added. "The stockpile will complement, but not replace, other national efforts to mitigate an influenza pandemic. Countries are urged to continue to strengthen their pandemic preparedness plans."

SAGE also recommended that WHO continue the urgent development of the stockpile, and that nations update their pandemic influenza preparedness plans to enable them to receive and efficiently distribute H5N1 vaccines from the stockpile.

In the light of encouraging safety and immunogenicity data, vaccination is considered to be the safest and most effective way of preventing or reducing death and illness associated with the H5N1 virus if it is the cause of an influenza pandemic. More than a dozen companies are currently developing H5N1 vaccines, and several vaccines are close to commercial production. One has been approved for use and several others have been submitted to regulatory authorities for licensure.