



THE SCOTTISH OFFICE

**NHS
MEL(1996)17**

National Health Service in Scotland Management Executive

St Andrew's House
Edinburgh EH1 3DG
15 February 1996

Telephone 031-244
Fax 031-244 2683

Dear Colleague

FOLIC ACID AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Summary

1. This MEL informs Health Board General Managers and NHS Trust Chief Executives about a forthcoming public awareness campaign to be launched on 26 February on the benefits of folic acid in the prevention of neural tube defects. A Chief Professional Letter has issued simultaneously with this MEL. It outlines the details of the campaign, and a copy is attached for information.

Action

2. General Managers and Chief Executives are asked to note the details of the CPL; and to ensure that relevant staff are informed and that they are familiar with the current advice on the taking of folic acid to prevent occurrence of neural tube defects.

Yours sincerely

DAVID STEEL
Head of Health Gain

Addressees

For action:

General Managers, Health Boards
Chief Executives, NHS Trusts

For information:

General Manager, Health Education
Board for Scotland
General Manager, CSA
Executive Director, SCPMDE
General Manager, State Hospitals
Board for Scotland

Enquiries to:

Molly Robertson
Public Health Policy Unit
Department of Health
Room 54H
St Andrew's House
EDINBURGH
EH1 3DG
Tel: 0131-244-2456
Fax: 0131-244-2846

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FRP16412





Dear Colleague

FOLIC ACID AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Issue

The purpose of this letter is to alert you and other health professionals to a forthcoming public awareness campaign on the benefits of folic acid in the prevention of neural tube defects. It also requests your assistance in disseminating promotional material and in dealing with enquiries.

Background

In 1992 an Expert Advisory Group to the Chief Medical Officers in the UK¹ reviewed the scientific research in this area and recommended that, to reduce the risks of primary occurrence of neural tube defects, all women should increase their folates and folic acid intake prior to conception and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. To achieve this increase, the Group made the following recommendations:

- the range of bread and breakfast cereals fortified with folic acid should be increased;
- women who are planning a pregnancy should eat more folate-rich foods and avoid over-cooking them;
- they should also take a 400 microgram (mcg) folic acid supplement starting at the time they begin trying to conceive until the twelfth week of pregnancy; and
- women who have not been supplementing their folate/folic acid intake and who suspect they may be pregnant should start supplementing at once and continue until the twelfth week of pregnancy.

From -

Dr R E Kendell CBE MD FRSE
Chief Medical Officer

Miss A Jarvie RGN RM BA
Chief Nursing Officer

Mr W Scott Bsc MSc MRPharmS
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

St Andrew's House
Edinburgh EH1 3DG

8 February 1996

SODH/CMO(96)1
SODH/CNO(96)1

For action

All General Practitioners
Community Pharmacists
DPH/CAMOs
Consultants in Public Health Medicine
(Maternal and Child Health)
CANOs
CAPOs
Medical Directors of Trusts
Directors of Primary Care
Directors of Nursing, NHS Trusts
Chief Pharmacists, NHS Trusts
Health Promotion Managers

For information

Royal College of Physicians (Edinburgh)
Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons
(Glasgow)
Royal College of Obstetricians and
Gynaecologists
Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great
Britain (Scottish Branch)
Royal College of GPs
Royal College of Nursing Scottish Board
Royal College of Midwives Scottish
Board
Scottish Health Visitors' Association
Community and District Nursing
Association, Scotland
The National Board for
Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting,
Scotland
The Association of British Paediatric
Nurses (Scottish Branch)

Further enquiries

Dr E Sowler (Medical) 0131 244 2827
Mrs J Swaffield (Nursing) 0131 244 2310
Mrs G Overton (Pharmaceutical) 0131
244 2597

Women or men who themselves have neural tube defects, or have a child with a neural tube defect, should be counselled about their increased risk of a future child being affected. Women in these categories who wish to become, or are at risk of becoming, pregnant should be advised to minimise the risk of recurrence by taking a daily folic acid supplement of 5mg. Supplements of 5mg are, of course, only available on prescription.

These recommendations remain fully relevant.

Copies of the Expert Advisory Group's Report were issued at the time, and a further publicity campaign on the subject was launched in November 1993 to bring the advice to the attention of those likely to benefit from it. Supplies of leaflets and posters have been available from the Department on request since then. These are superseded by the material prepared for the current campaign, and should be withdrawn once that material becomes available.

The Campaign

Recent research commissioned to assess awareness of the Government's recommendations has indicated that, whilst understanding of the protective effect of folic acid has increased since 1993, there is a need to enhance further the knowledge of the general female population of how and when to increase folic acid intake.

The Government therefore intends to run a folic acid awareness campaign over the next 2-3 years. The initial elements of the campaign, targeted in the main at women of child-bearing age who have not previously had a child with a neural tube defect, will comprise:-

- public education, focusing on advice to women by means of a card, leaflet and poster. These will advise women that before and during early pregnancy they should each day take a 400mcg folic acid tablet (available from chemists or health food stores), and eat 200mcg of folic acid from folate rich foods; and
- the involvement of health professionals in disseminating the message. A supply of the new cards, leaflets and posters will be issued to all GP practices, pharmacies, family planning and well woman clinics and other suitable places by the Health Education Board for Scotland later this month. The main launch of the campaign will be at the end of February. A freephone NHS number will be available to the public to deal with additional requests for the leaflet.

There will also be media involvement to publicise the campaign.

We would appreciate your assistance in drawing the material to the attention of the target group and in dealing with enquiries from patients. We believe that this can be incorporated within your current professional interactions or activities.

The Health Departments and their health education agencies will, in the longer term, continue to work to maintain awareness in this area. A major element of this will involve working with industry on efforts to secure the fortification of a wider range of foods.

Robert Kendell

R E KENDELL
CMO

Aune Jarvie

MISS A JARVIE
CNO

William Scott

W SCOTT
CPO

¹ Folic Acid and the Prevention of Neural Tube Defects: Report from an Expert Advisory Group. London, Department of Health, 1992.