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Deaths not linked to H1N1 vaccine: WHO

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By Stephanie Nebehay

GENEVA (Reuters) - The World Health Organization said on Thursday the H1N1 vaccine had been cleared of blame for 41 deaths which health authorities worldwide had investigated after suspicions they might have been caused by the inoculation.

The U.N. agency reaffirmed that the pandemic vaccine is as safe as the seasonal flu vaccine used for more than 60 years. It also voiced concern that some pregnant women and others at risk were shunning it because of a fear of side-effects.

"No new safety issue has been identified from reports issued to date ... Reporting so far reconfirms that the pandemic flu vaccine is as safe as the seasonal flu vaccine," Marie-Paule Kieny, WHO's top vaccine expert, told a telephone conference.

Governments have so far reported that 65 million vaccine doses have been administered against H1N1, known as swine flu, in 16 countries, but the true figure is probably higher since immunization campaigns are under way in 40 countries, she said.

Side-effects commonly reported include swelling and redness or pain at the injection site, although some had fever or headache, and all symptoms usually disappear after 48 hours.

A "small number of deaths" had been reported, she said, and a WHO spokeswoman later put the figure at 41 in six countries.

"Although some investigations are still ongoing, the results of the completed investigations reported to WHO have ruled out that the pandemic vaccine is the cause of death," Kieny said.

Authorities in China -- where 11 million people have been vaccinated -- have reported 2 deaths following inoculation and 15 cases of severe side effects, the WHO said in a statement.

"Thorough investigation of these deaths, including a review of autopsy results, determined that underlying medical conditions were the cause of death and not the vaccine," it said of China.

Fewer than a dozen suspected cases of Guillain-Barre syndrome had been reported following pandemic vaccination, she said. "Only a few of this Guillain-Barre may be linked to the pandemic vaccine and patients have recovered," she added.

"NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE"

GlaxoSmithKline Plc, AstraZeneca Plc, Novartis and Sanofi-Aventis are among about 25 manufacturers producing H1N1 vaccine using different techniques.

"No significant difference in the safety profile between different types of vaccine has been detected," Kieny said.

She denounced conspiracy theories about vaccines circulating on the Internet, saying they were causing "artificial worries."

"We have to reiterate that the vaccines are safe, that the disease in certain people can be severe and can be cause of death," she said.

The H1N1 virus is known to have killed 6,250 people worldwide since emerging in North America last April, according to the WHO.

A survey of doctors showed on Wednesday that more than half of Britons being offered vaccination against H1N1 were turning it down because they feared side-effects or believed the virus was too mild to bother about.

"It is worrying indeed that certain groups don't seem to be coming readily to be vaccinated. But we hope that the data ... on the safety of these vaccines will dissipate the worries that a population might have and will help convince them that the vaccine is safe and vaccination will protect them against this disease which can be severe," Kieny said.

(For full WHO statement go to link.reuters.com/zuv52g)

(Additional reporting by [Jonathan Lynn](#); Editing by [Sam Cage](#) and Andrew Roche)

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