

## **Information Further to Ministerial Answers**

### **Information further to the Plenary Debate on Iraq, issued by the First Minister on 25 March 2003**

#### **To Nick Bourne:**

During the debate on Iraq on 19 March, I promised to write to you on the preparedness of the NHS in Wales to deal with military casualties and the impact of a possible chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear terrorist attack.

Ambulance and hospital major incident plans exist to counteract the deliberate release of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear materials. Since 11 September 2001, the health service in Wales has taken a number of measures to strengthen resilience against such threats. These measures include the provision of:

- respiration equipment to be used at the scene of an incident or hospital;
- antibiotics to treat those exposed to biological agents, such as anthrax;
- nerve agent antidotes for the treatment of chemical exposure, such as sarin;
- antidotes to poisons, such as cyanide;
- potassium iodate tablets for radiation incidents; and
- vaccines, including vaccine to control the threat of smallpox.

Certain stocks of these are held in Wales now as part of a UK health department stockpile to be deployed anywhere in the UK should the need arise. By establishing this range of health countermeasures, and working on a UK-wide basis, we are raising the threshold of our capabilities to respond to a deliberate release, however unlikely such an incident may be.

The major emergency exercise planned for London has been cancelled, but there have been major incident tests taking place in Wales and others are planned, although these do not get the same amount of publicity as the London exercise. In June, for example, a major incident exercise is planned for north Wales, which will test plans to deal with a nuclear incident. The Assembly Government is involved in this exercise and will continue to provide full support for emergency planning exercises of this kind.

There are long-standing plans for bringing back military personnel from overseas for NHS treatment. This planning is undertaken by UK health departments, including our own, together with the Ministry of Defence and Department for Transport. The aim is to ensure that military patients are assessed promptly at whichever airport they arrive in the UK and then transferred to the appropriate hospital without delay. The Assembly's NHS Wales Department has been working at UK level, and with NHS Wales, to put all necessary measures into place to look after any military patients that may arrive in Wales. A number of airports could be used, which will minimise the disruption to routine healthcare by spreading the additional workload across the UK. I should add that a review of our own arrangements has been completed and, should military patients arrive in Wales, they will receive whatever treatment they need as quickly as possible.