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South Korea to continue flu vaccinations after 25 deaths trigger calls for a pause

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A campaign aimed at immunising 30 million people against influenza in South Korea will continue despite an unusually high number of deaths in those recently vaccinated, after the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) declined a request from the Korean Medical Association to pause the programme.

“Our team sees low possibility that the deaths resulted from the shots,” Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the KDCA, told parliament.

At least seven of the nine people the KDCA investigated had underlying conditions, the agency said. Preliminary examinations in six of the deaths showed no direct link to the vaccines, with no toxic substances found.

The reported deaths come only a week after the programme restarted. Its launch was halted for three weeks in late September after about 5 million doses of the vaccine were discovered being stored without refrigeration. None of those compromised doses were administered to people, the agency said. The people who died had had vaccines from various manufacturers. The programme includes the products of Sanofi, GSK, and three Korean makers.

About 8.3 million people have been inoculated since the campaign resumed on 13 October, with around 350 cases of adverse reactions reported, including 25 deaths. The first death to draw attention was that of a 17 year old boy, two days after receiving his shot. The other deaths involved elderly adults. The most deaths linked to previous flu vaccination campaigns in South Korea was six, in 2005.

“I understand and regret that people are concerned about the vaccine,” health minister Park Neung-hoo said, promising to “thoroughly examine the entire process from production to distribution.” Post-mortem examinations now under way will also test for covid-19, he said.