



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

MEDIA RELEASE

6th February 2010

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER MOBILISES GPs TO SUPPORT PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009 INFLUENZA VACCINATIONS

Australia's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Jim Bishop, is calling on GPs to promote vaccination against the pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza to their patients before the flu season begins in Australia.

Professor Bishop has enlisted the support of his GP Roundtable, which includes representatives of the AMA, RACGP and the GP Network and he is writing to all GPs in Australia to ask them to proactively promote vaccination for all people aged 6 months and above in an effort to stop the spread of swine flu which is expected to be the dominant influenza strain in 2010.

"New research is showing that an estimated 3 million Australian adults were vaccinated against H1N1 in the first two months to November, and we have now distributed almost 7 million doses of the vaccine to GPs and immunisation providers. However, we must see more people vaccinated before the flu season arrives to ensure the community is fully protected," Professor Bishop said.

"Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza is similar to seasonal flu but different in some important ways. Compared to seasonal flu it causes more hospitalisation, more hospitalisation in children under 5 and more admissions to ICU with viral pneumonia (around 700 in 2009 compared with around 55 per year for the previous years).

"Despite the considerable efforts made by family doctors, vaccine clinics and other immunisation providers, vaccination coverage still remains currently below what is needed to confidently protect the community against an anticipated second wave of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza this year."

Professor Bishop said Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza is expected to return for a second wave and probably much earlier than the normal flu season based on experience from the Northern Hemisphere.

"The return of children to school in the North American autumn was associated with a substantial increase in the number of cases of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza, an early start to the flu season and a higher influenza peak than usual.

"As the new school year gets underway in Australia, there is a risk pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza will start to circulate again, associated with an early influenza season here. It takes up to 2 weeks for immunity to develop following vaccination, so it is important to vaccinate anyone who wants protection against pandemic (H1N1) 2009 as soon as possible."

Professor Bishop said while swine flu was mild to moderate in most people and similar to seasonal flu, it put more people in hospital and in Intensive Care, especially younger ones.

“In the 2009 season, 38% of deaths from pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza occurred in people with no known risk factors and the median age of death was 53 years, compared with 83 years from seasonal influenza.

“It is particularly important to vaccinate children, adolescents and young adults as pandemic (H1N1) 2009 influenza spreads more readily in these age groups and children under age 5 years had the highest rates of hospitalisation in the first wave of the pandemic,” Professor Bishop said.

“Australia is fortunate to have a free pandemic (H1N1) 2009 vaccine available for all Australians and I am appealing to GPs, practice nurses and other immunisation providers to encourage people to get the vaccine early and not wait for the seasonal flu vaccine which is only free for some people and will be in a more limited supply.”

Media contacts: Kay McNiece, 0412 132 585, Office of the CMO
John Flannery, 0419 494 761, AMA
Dr Emil Djakic, 0428 256 563, AGPN
Dr Chris Mitchell, 0427 878 383, RACGP