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MEDIA RELEASE

FLU VAX INCREASES FOR KIDS: ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

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IMMUNISATION providers should offer annual influenza vaccination for children aged 6 months to less than 5 years and report it to the Australian Immunisation Register, according to the authors of a Perspective published online today by the Medical Journal of Australia.

“Hospitalisation rates for influenza are highest in young children, with annual rates about 100 per 100 000 in those aged 6–23 months,” wrote the authors, led by Dr Frank Beard, a public health physician at the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, at the Children’s Hospital at Westmead, and a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney.

While the Australian immunisation handbook recommends that all children aged between 6 months and 5 years be vaccinated annually against influenza, the National Immunisation Program only funds the vaccine for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and those children with medical conditions which increase the risk for severe influenza. Western Australia has funded flu vaccine for all children between 6 months and less than 5 years since 2008, and after the record flu season in 2017, the ACT, NSW, South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania also provided funding for the 2018 season.

“National influenza vaccine coverage for young children increased in 2018, reaching 25.6% overall and 29.5% in Indigenous children, which represents a fivefold increase for non-Indigenous children and a twofold increase for Indigenous children compared with 2017,” Beard and colleague wrote.

“Universal vaccination programs are known to achieve higher coverage than targeted programs.”

The authors identified barriers to achieving better influenza vaccine uptake in young children, including “insufficient awareness of potential severity of disease, uncertainty regarding the safety and effectiveness of the influenza vaccine, and concerns about increased numbers of childhood vaccines, as well as practical barriers to accessing immunisation services”.

They made three recommendations:

- offer ready access to annual influenza vaccination for all children aged 6 months to less than 5 years, ensuring that a second dose is received in the first year of vaccination;
- provide evidence-based information on the benefits of influenza vaccination, addressing any potential misconceptions; and
- ensure that all vaccinations given, including all influenza vaccines, are reported to the Australian Immunisation Register.

“A nationally consistent approach could potentially reduce confusion among providers and parents around the importance of influenza vaccination for children. If the influenza vaccine could be included on the NIP for all young children, this may also contribute to facilitating higher uptake,” Beard and colleagues concluded.

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