



TIME TO LIFT UPTAKE OF FLU VACCINATION OF CHILDREN

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INFLUENZA vaccine uptake in children has grown in response to increased awareness and progressive expansion of funding, according to the authors of a Perspective published today by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

“Before the COVID-19 pandemic, influenza was responsible for a higher disease burden and overall health impact than any other vaccine-preventable disease in Australia,” wrote the authors, led by Dr Samantha Carlson, a Postdoctoral Research Officer with the Wesfarmers Centre of Vaccines and Infectious Diseases at the Telethon Kids Institute in Perth.

“Historically, Australian influenza notification rates have been highest in children, particularly in those aged less than 2 years. The highest annual hospitalisation rates for influenza overall have been recorded in children aged less than 6 months (192 per 100 000 per year), followed by children aged 6–23 months (109 per 100 000 per year).

“Although paediatric hospitalisation rates are high, annual rates of influenza-associated deaths in children are, thankfully, low compared with adults: 0.20–0.39 per 100 000 children aged under 5 years compared with 0.65 per 100 000 in people aged 65–74 years and 3.66 per 100 000 in people aged 75 years or more,” Carlson and colleagues from The National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, The University of Sydney, The University of Western Australia, Monash University and Alfred Health wrote.

All Australians aged 6 months or more are recommended to receive annual influenza vaccination, with free influenza vaccines for the highest risk groups provided by the National Immunisation Program (NIP). In 2018, after a severe flu season in 2017 with record numbers of children hospitalised, all Australian states and territories, except the Northern Territory began funding influenza vaccination for all children aged 6 to 59 months, with the NT following in 2019.

The NIP expanded in 2019 to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of all ages (closing the funding gap for those aged 5 to < 15 years), and in 2020, influenza vaccine was added to the NIP for all children aged 6–59 months.

“While a 43.9% uptake in children aged 6–59 months in 2020 in Australia represents a significant improvement from past low vaccination rates, Australia needs strategies to improve and sustain high coverage,” wrote Carlson and colleagues.



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“These could include personalised vaccination reminders, provision of greater access to vaccination services, and tools to assist healthcare providers to promote influenza vaccine.

“Influenza vaccine uptake in young children in Australia has increased in response to the progressive expansion of funding and is now delivered under the NIP,” they concluded. “Further gains in uptake should ensure that protection against influenza disease in children is optimised during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and in years to come.”

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CONTACTS:

For interviews with Associate Professor Chris Blyth

Kate Crassweller

Communications Specialist

Wesfarmers Centre of Vaccines and Infectious Disease

Ph: 08 6319 1424

Email: Kate.Crassweller@telethonkids.org.au

For interviews with Dr Frank Beard

Madeleine Smith

Media and Communications Officer

National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance

Ph: 0429 350 279

Email: SCHN-NCIRS@health.nsw.gov.au