

## Maintaining routine vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic

TO THE EDITOR: Restrictions and concerns associated with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) have led to decreased routine immunisation coverage in many countries, including the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup> and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Australian data showing the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on vaccination coverage are not yet available, but it has disrupted services provided by the National Immunisation Program, which funds vaccination for children, adolescents, adults and special risk groups. In the face of ongoing COVID-19 risk and restrictions, maintaining a resilient routine vaccination program is crucial.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened barriers to vaccination. Lockdown restrictions have affected immunisation service accessibility. Specifically, some clinics reduced face-to-face appointments in favour of telehealth<sup>3</sup> or closed due to insufficient space and increased staffing and other requirements.<sup>4</sup> Patients may have rescheduled appointments to avoid COVID-19 exposure in waiting rooms, while school-based programs have been disrupted by closures. Reduced consultations limit not only opportunities to vaccinate but also opportunities for health care providers to address vaccine questions and concerns and reinforce trust. Employment changes related to COVID-19 may also exacerbate cost barriers for people at risk of

under-immunisation, such as migrants, international students, asylum seekers and refugees.<sup>5</sup>

To improve access, some jurisdictions have successfully established drive-through vaccine clinics, and pharmacists in some states have been granted expanded permission to vaccinate children against influenza. However, some families may have delayed vaccines due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and governments may need to consider additional resources for catch-up vaccination and extensions or grace periods for "No jab, no pay" and "No jab, no play" policies. School-based vaccination programs should be re-established as a priority when schools reopen.

Publicly available vaccination coverage data will not reflect COVID-19-related impacts until as late as December 2020. We recommend early release of more timely data to ensure service providers gain feedback on program performance. We also recommend awareness campaigns promoting timely National Immunisation Program vaccination or catch-up. Information should be culturally and linguistically appropriate and should be developed through consultation and engagement with diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Australia's immunisation providers are dedicated and adaptable, but we must now respond quickly to the challenges of COVID-19 and remain vigilant to maintain routine

vaccination coverage across the lifespan.

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