



Australian Government
Department of Health

27 September 2017

Statement from the Chief Medical Officer on seasonal influenza vaccines

The Australian Government is committed to immunisation and to ensuring Australia has the best possible vaccination program underpinned by sound evidence and effective vaccines.

The National Immunisation Program (NIP) provides free seasonal influenza vaccines to those most at risk of influenza and its complications. The program is demand driven, which means any eligible individual can access a free vaccine. In 2017, over 4.5 million doses have been distributed to meet the current take up of eligible Australians for the free vaccine.

Currently only around 70% of eligible Australians currently take up the free vaccine. The Australian Government strongly encourages the approximately 2.5 million eligible Australians, who do not currently have the vaccine, to be vaccinated and will make available sufficient vaccine to meet demand each year.

Each year, seasonal influenza causes significant mortality and morbidity in the Australian community. The virus is extremely complex and dynamic which means a new vaccine is required every year but also makes it very difficult to manufacture and distribute influenza vaccines each year.

2017 has been characterised by high levels of influenza A (H3N2) which disproportionately affects the elderly. We have seen reports of high numbers of deaths in nursing homes this year and also amongst healthy adults. These are tragic events which underscore the message that influenza is a serious disease and that vaccination is absolutely critical for protecting individuals and the community.

We do know that the 2017 vaccines have had a relatively good match with circulating strains, which provides the best opportunity for protection. There is, however evidence that the effectiveness of the vaccines has been less than usual this year, particularly in terms of protecting the elderly against influenza A (H3N2).

The quadrivalent seasonal influenza vaccines supplied through the NIP are similar to those supplied in like countries (eg: the United Kingdom) and also on the private market.

To be supplied through the NIP, vaccines must be registered by the Therapeutic Goods Administration and recommended by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC). These processes ensure vaccines are safe and effective. In addition, competitive tendering arrangements have meant the Australian Government has been able to achieve value for money when purchasing vaccines – that is good news for the Australian community.

Of the vaccines supplied internationally specifically for the elderly, one (a high dose formulation) is not registered in Australia and the other (an adjuvanted vaccine) does not have an up to date registration in Australia. The PBAC has not yet received a submission for either vaccine.

The Australian Government has been carefully monitoring vaccine effectiveness for seasonal influenza vaccines and is committed to exploring enhanced vaccination program arrangements through the NIP, including the use of advanced vaccines for those aged 65 years and over into the future.

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