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**Minister for Health and Ageing**

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Free Pandemic Flu Vaccine Available For All**

Today Australia will embark on what is potentially the biggest vaccination program in its history, offering free pandemic (swine flu) vaccine to every person in the country.

From today all States and Territories began offering vaccine to adults and children 10 years and over. Once the vaccine is registered for younger children by the Therapeutic Goods Administration, children will also be eligible to be vaccinated.

A total of 5.5 million doses of the vaccine have been delivered around Australia for the start of this program. Thousands more vaccines are being produced each day by local pharmaceutical company CSL. The Rudd Government has placed an order for 21 million doses of the newly developed vaccine.

While the H1N1 09 influenza has remained a mild illness in most people, it is important that we don't lose sight of the more devastating hard edge of this disease.

This influenza has led to more than 4700 people being hospitalised in Australia, with around 13% of these being admitted to ICU. Almost 1500 of those hospitalisations have been in children and teenagers. Sadly, since the pandemic began, there have been 180 associated deaths.

Unlike seasonal influenza which mainly impacts the elderly, the current pandemic influenza strain has affected younger people. The average age of Australian deaths from pandemic influenza is 51 years. Ten deaths have been recorded in children.

Australia's Chief Medical Officer, Professor Jim Bishop, has expressed concern that while the normal winter influenza season is on the wane, pandemic influenza may continue into summer as it has done in the northern hemisphere. There is also a chance of the pandemic flu returning as a more virulent disease.

Therefore, it is important that people take this disease seriously and protect themselves and their families by getting vaccinated.

Australia will be one of the first countries in the world to offer the vaccine to the general population and all people aged over ten are immediately eligible to receive the free vaccination.

Those people most vulnerable to the disease – such as those with chronic respiratory disease, diabetes, cancer, severe obesity and conditions that suppress the immune system, as well as pregnant women and Indigenous Australians – are encouraged to talk to their doctor about having this flu shot as soon as it is available in their local area.

State and Territory health authorities have a range of strategies in place to provide the vaccine to their populations including through GPs, influenza clinics, Aboriginal Medical Services and local government.

For information about how people can access the free vaccine, ring the National Pandemic Hotline on 180 2007 or visit [www.healthemergency.gov.au](http://www.healthemergency.gov.au)

**For all media inquiries, please contact the Minister's Office on 02 6277 7220.**