



## THE HON JUSTINE ELLIOT MP

### Minister for Ageing

#### MEDIA RELEASE

July 19, 2008

#### Older Australians urged to take up Free Flu Vaccinations

Presentations of influenza-like illnesses to GPs rose in May and June indicating that winter-related bacterial and viral infections have commenced in Australia.

The Minister for Ageing, Mrs Justine Elliot today urged any of the **2.7 million Australians over 65** who have not already been vaccinated to protect themselves from potentially life-threatening winter illness with their annual free influenza shots.

The National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System records show that during the period January 1 to July 18, 2008, there were 1,237 cases of laboratory confirmed influenza notified in Australia.

(In a similar period – January 1, 2007 to June 30, 2007 – there were 912 notified cases of influenza-like illnesses.)

“As the ‘flu season generally lasts until late August or September, many people can still be protected by having the vaccine now,” Mrs Elliot said.

“My primary concern is the welfare and health of Australians – particularly frail and aged Australians.

“Infection control in Australia is a big task and we can never wipe out infectious diseases, but we must always look at ways to minimise risk.

“We are seeing a slight increase in notifications of influenza-like illnesses over the previous year.”

(There is currently an increase in cases of influenza associated with World Youth Day.)

Of January 1 to July 18, 2008 cases, 47 per cent were in Queensland, 21 per cent in NSW and 12 per cent in Western Australia. The highest rates of influenza positive cases have been in individuals aged over 65.

**As part of its preparations for the influenza season, the Australian Government has delivered almost 2.6 million influenza vaccine doses to States and Territories for use in the 2008 government-funded influenza immunisation program for people over 65.**

The Government has provided \$28 million for the 2008 influenza vaccine program.

Last year, 2.57 million Australians over the age of 65 received the free flu vaccinations from their GPs, at clinics or in nursing homes across the country.

Over the last five years, influenza and pneumonia were responsible for 2.5 per cent of all deaths in Australia and, in 2006, resulted in 2,725 deaths – making these conditions together the 12th highest cause of death.

“For most people, vaccination is completely safe. I urge everyone over 65, including those in nursing homes, who have not already been vaccinated to take these seasonal precautions to ensure that they have a safer and healthier winter,” Mrs Elliot said.

#### **Data on vaccines supplied Australia-wide**

<b>State/Territory</b>	<b>Number of vaccines supplied</b>
New South Wales	881,000
Victoria	663,000
Queensland	435,000
Western Australia	265,000
South Australia	225,000
Tasmania	78,000
Australian Capital Territory	31,000
Northern Territory	21,000
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>2,599,000</b>

In addition, on July 15, in response to recent gastroenteritis outbreaks in nursing homes, Mrs Elliot announced a response plan. It involved:

- **A review of the accreditation standards on infection control;**
- **Development of a gastroenteritis awareness and prevention education kit; and**
- **Development of new national guidelines specifically on norovirus - a common and highly infectious cause of gastroenteritis in nursing homes.**

The plan builds on the new Food Safety Standard which was gazetted in October 2006 by the previous Government and is expected to take effect on 5 October 2008.

This new standard mandates a requirement for organisations, including nursing homes to deliver food services to vulnerable populations to implement a food safety plan.

In Australia, there are currently 2,839 nursing homes receiving Australian Government subsidies to provide care to more than 170,000 people in aged care.

In 2007, there were 1,825 gastroenteritis outbreaks reported in Australia. Of those, 989 (54 per cent) were in nursing homes.

Since 1 January 2008, there have been 671 gastro reported outbreaks nationally, with 383 (57 per cent) reported in nursing homes.

State and territory governments have legislation in place regarding infectious disease and are responsible for investigating them. Nursing homes must meet the state and territory requirements.

Currently, the Department of Health and Ageing is working with the states and territories to develop a national communication strategy for a more rapid information flow about outbreaks of infectious diseases between nursing homes, public health authorities and the Aged Care Complaints Investigation Scheme.

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