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Minister for Health and Ageing

TRANSCRIPT

**Press conference with CMO Professor Jim Bishop, Melbourne
(Swine Flu Vaccination for Children, COAG & Health Reform)
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E & OE – PROOF ONLY

Nicola Roxon: Thank you for coming this morning.

As you know, my name's Nicola Roxon, I'm the Health Minister, and I'm here again with Jim Bishop, the Commonwealth's Chief Medical Officer, and today I'm very pleased to be able to announce that the TGA has approved for registration the vaccine for children for swine flu. That means children now from six months of age will be able to get the vaccine and we are encouraging families and particularly parents who might have been waiting for this approval to now take the opportunity to go to their GPs and, as a family, get the protection that is provided from this vaccine.

I'm very pleased that so far the rollout of the vaccination program has been going well but there is the opportunity, and we certainly know anecdotally that many families were waiting until they could take the opportunity to be vaccinated together.

We do urge families to now do that, contact their GPs, check that they have stocks in and can arrange to go and have their vaccine.

For children six months to nine years it is a two-dose vaccination that's required, about four weeks apart but, importantly, the first dose does provide significant protection but the second dose is to ensure that there is even more thorough protection.

So this should be added to the list of families who are planning what needs to be done before they start school. It's a good opportunity now to go and, as well as buying your school uniforms and making sure everything is in order, get your vaccination, ensure that your child is protected and, additionally for those families who might have friends or relatives coming from the northern hemisphere or may, in fact, be travelling over this Christmas period, it is important to take the opportunity to protect yourself.

Of course the flu is at its peak in some countries in the northern hemisphere and we know it can travel very easily between countries so the government is urging all Australians to take advantage of this free vaccine. It's now available for children from six months and above and we believe it's an appropriate protection where the government has paid for the vaccine and, in most instances, GPs are bulk billing.

So easy to do, a good idea to try and do it before Christmas and a particular message for those who've got kids starting school to do this as part of their planning to make sure their child is ready for school and got the best protection they can have.

We're happy to answer any questions but that's basically the nub of it.

Question: How many children, approximately, would be eligible for this and how many doses do you have available?

Nicola Roxon: Well, it's obviously the same vaccine that has now been approved. It can be provided in a single dose vaccine. Jim might be able to say how many are going to be produced of those but, of course, this is part of the 21 million doses that have been ordered. Children can receive it through the multidose vials or through the single dose vials and there are several million children in this age group who, of course, are now going to be eligible for this protection.

Question: Are there any children who it's not admitted for?

Nicola Roxon: There are. Jim might want to add, of course, people with particular allergies but I'll allow Jim to...

Jim Bishop: Yes, basically, obviously the same with all vaccines, children that - or people that have had allergy to eggs particularly or had previous reactions are those that should be notifying their doctors about that.

Children up to the age of six months are not recommended for the vaccine but if there's a high level of uptake amongst children and amongst adults then those younger children will be protected as well because the flu won't be able to move around the community to the same extent.

Nicola Roxon: And of course we are encouraging the way that this is available for most Australians is through their GP or a nurse at their general practice. Of course if there are any particular issues or concerns a family or child might have they should raise them with their GP.

Question: Reading between the lines in this press release it sounds like you're worried that not enough people have taken up the opportunity for swine flu vaccine so far. Is that true and how many people have actually been vaccinated?

Nicola Roxon: We know how many doses have been ordered from the GPs. It's not compulsory for GPs to record and send back to the Commonwealth each and every vaccination so we have good estimates and we have information from Queensland where they are running a more thorough surveillance program, but we know that nearly five million doses have been provided. We don't expect that that five million would yet have been given to each and every of five million Australians but, look, I think this is a process where people were very focused on the risk at the height of the flu season here in Australia. It's probably true that some families have said, look, it's not something we need to worry about but we are seeing overseas that there are still some pretty severe results and very high rates of the flu in America and Canada so we urge Australians to take the opportunity to protect themselves.

If people are uncertain the extent of the risk from the flu, nevertheless this is an added protection that you're giving your family and I certainly would encourage all people to do that. I certainly will be taking my daughter now to get the vaccination. I think it is an important thing to do when you can protect people from a threat which may be a growing one. Again, it's all about being cautious and ensuring that we have the maximum protection.

Now, of course, the seasonal flu vaccine next year will not be available until March or April when it's usually available. The priority for seasonal flu protection is for the older Australians and some particularly at-risk groups so really for children and families with children in primary and high school, this is the best way to get protection for what we expect will be the dominant flu strain next year and particularly because Australians are such heavy and enthusiastic travellers over this Christmas period, we know how quickly it can be brought back in through our borders or from others who are travelling to Australia to see their families, so get that protection and take advantage of what is a free vaccine provided by the Commonwealth.

Question: Do you think an element in the slow take-up has been misinformation from the internet and from groups like anti-vaccination network?

Nicola Roxon: I think we've been quite clear about the anti-vaccination network's objections to any type of vaccination which is not based in any of the science or medical advice that we have.

I can't explain or predict how many people pay attention to that. I think it is irresponsible material, by and large, and I would encourage all Australians to act on the advice of the Government, of course based on the advice from the Chief Medical Officer, our specialised teams that meet to provide us with information, the very rigorous TGA process to ensure that this is safe for children, and we are satisfied of all those things and I think it is foolish for people to spread misinformation about a vaccine which can actually provide protection where we know there have been some bad consequences in paediatric situations, so for young children, and this is a way to protect against that.

Do you want to add on that at all, Jim?

Jim Bishop: No, I think the important thing to note is in the last winter, in the last wave of this infection, that there were a large number of children that were admitted to hospital, that children under five had one of the highest hospitalisation rates and unfortunately quite a few of those died, around 30 deaths below the age of 20 and most of those didn't have underlying medical conditions.

So these are the figures from Australia which I think add to the weight of needing to protect young people from this flu.

Nicola Roxon: And perhaps it might be of interest to people - the material that I have here says that in Canada, the paediatric surveillance is showing that children are being hospitalised with H1N1 flu at rates far outpacing the previous flu seasons, and in October November this year, 526 cases were reported by the 12 paediatric health centres across Canada - more than Canadian investigators expected to see during an entire northern winter.

And in a single week in November in 2009, 240 children were hospitalised.

This is about half the total number of children that were hospitalised at the same time last - in the whole of the Canadian flu season last year.

So there are some trends that are showing this is still a very virulent disease. We know from our experience here in Australia that it's a disease that likes young people. And this is now the opportunity to ensure that if you have children six months and older that you can access this vaccine from your GP, make an appointment, do it before Christmas if you can, make sure you do it before the school year starts if it's not possible to do it before Christmas.

And particularly make sure if you're travelling or are in contact with people who have been travelling through the northern hemisphere.

It's just a wise investment in your health and your family's health.

Question: [Inaudible question]

Nicola Roxon: Yeah, look, we're always worried that when protection is available that people take advantage of it; that they not be too laid back in an Australian way to not protect themselves from something that could be a bigger risk in the future.

Of course, the media has the opportunity to assist us with this in highlighting that there are still some pretty significant peaks and statistics overseas.

We're not moving enough I think is - that's our energy saving strategy here.

Question: [Inaudible question]

Nicola Roxon: And so obviously, you know, you guys have got a role to play in being able to highlight some of those figures from overseas and encourage people not to take a too laid back approach. But we do have the 21 million doses. They are available now. And will be available in the new year.

We are having some requests from overseas to be able to provide some of our stocks while they're waiting for orders to be provided, and of course where we can do that and ensure that Australians are still going to have enough of the supply if there is a rush, will we do it?

And otherwise, of course, our priority is to make sure that Australians have got that protection.

But we were first in the queue. That means that CSL has provided a large number of vaccines to us, and some countries have been approaching us for assistance because of that good planning, and because we did order a large amount of the vaccine.

Question: [Inaudible question]

JIM BISHOP: Yeah, I think the - we've - the, as you know, the...

Male Speaker: [Indistinct]

Jim Bishop: All right. Just the, as you know, the WHO has been working with Australia and a number of other countries, and 10 per cent of our vaccine allocation is being provided to WHO.

And we're very pleased to be with other countries in relation to that. The second thing is that in relation to other countries, we are looking at other opportunities to assist, particularly in the region.

And I believe there's also been a donation [inaudible] to ... making the vaccine more available through the AusAID group.

The other thing to say is that of course one of the reasons for making this announcement today is to emphasise that in the northern hemisphere, flu came early.

So while I think we always think of these flus as going in a seasonal pattern, when you've got a new flu, the danger is of course it'll arrive early. And certainly that occurred in the United States.

So again, it's an opportunity to look at vaccination now, rather than waiting until a traditional flu season before that vaccination occurs.

Question: [Inaudible question]

Jim Bishop: The vaccines are always given one year's life expectancy, but then that's usually just a conservative view which is then reviewed by the TGA at the appropriate time.

These are long-life vaccines, and the usual thing with seasonal or other flus is they can be extended.

Nicola Roxon: We've also had some requests for assistance with our anti-viral stockpile. And again obviously because this is a worldwide pandemic, it is in our interests where we can do that safely and ensure that Australia has sufficient supplies to be able to provide those supplies. And particularly it sometimes means that some of our short-dated stock can be used and replaced with others that are on order from other countries, that extend the stockpiles life of the drugs that are in the stockpile.

So you know, we are in a global battle against this pandemic.

My priority as the Health Minister is to make sure that Australians are protected. But we do have responsibilities, internationally, and we've been working closely through the World Health Organization to ensure that where we can assist we do.

Question: Can I ask about the Health Reform Commission? When are you going to have a proposal [indistinct] Premiers [indistinct]?

Nicola Roxon: Well COAG is meeting on Monday next week, so the Prime Minister and Premiers will be meeting to go through the results of our consultation process where we've conducted seventy-six consultations across the country.

It's going to be an opportunity for the Prime Minister to provide information to the states and territories about what we gleaned from that process - and some of our thinking. And it's also an opportunity for the Premiers to talk to us about the strength and weaknesses of their systems, and what they might like to perform in partnership with us.

So really, Monday is the formal opportunity for those discussions to commence. I think that it's so far been very strongly welcomed by the states and territories because we all know that getting this right is an opportunity that we have, really, once every few decades.

And we've got one of those opportunities now, and I don't think the Prime Minister or the Premiers will want to throw that away.

Question: And when's the public likely to know whether the Federal Government's going to take over hospitals.

Nicola Roxon: Well we've made our plans quite public. We're talking with the states and territories at COAG. There will be intensive negotiations, no doubt, that will flow from that, and in the new year, we propose that we will have a national reform plan, we've always said. We're keen to put that to the states and hope that they will work with us on that reform plan.

But if they don't we've kept the option open that we will go to the people, seeking a mandate, to be able to introduce those changes.

So that time frame is the one that we've announced since the release of the report in the middle of this year, and that's the timetable we're still sticking with.

Okay. All right. Thanks very much.

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