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COVID-19 AstraZeneca vaccine advice from ATAGI

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the highest priority in our response has been to protect the safety of the Australian population.

It is for this reason, Australia's response has always been based on expert medical advice.

The Australian Government received important advice this evening from Australia's expert vaccine advisory body, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI).

ATAGI has very carefully considered the latest vaccination findings out of Europe and the UK – which follow extremely rare instances of people, having taken the AstraZeneca vaccine, developing a very specific syndrome involving blood clots with low platelet counts.

The syndrome is called “thrombosis with thrombocytopenia”.

ATAGI has tonight recommended the COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine is preferred over the AstraZeneca vaccine for adults aged under 50 years.

This recommendation is based on the increasing risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19 in older adults – and hence a higher benefit from vaccination – and a potentially increased risk of “thrombosis with thrombocytopenia” following AstraZeneca vaccination among those aged under 50.

ATAGI has further recommended the AstraZeneca vaccine can be used in adults aged under 50 where the benefits clearly outweigh the risk for that individual and the person has made an informed decision based on an understanding of the risks and benefits.

It has also recommended people who have had the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine without any serious adverse effects can be given the second dose, including adults under 50 years.

The Government has accepted ATAGI's recommendations and will move swiftly to ensure Australia's vaccination program and advice to patients is adjusted accordingly.

The experience in Europe is that approximately one in every 250,000 people vaccinated with AstraZeneca is diagnosed with the rare blood clots. One person in Australia developed the syndrome after receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine.

It is important to note the AstraZeneca vaccine remains highly effective at preventing death and severe illness among people who have contracted COVID-19 – and that the incidence of the blood-clotting syndrome is very rare.

The most effective way for eligible people over the age of 50 in the Phase 1b category of Australia's rollout program to protect themselves from the effects of COVID-19 is to be vaccinated.

The decision by the Government to accept the ATAGI advice will have implications for the vaccine rollout program.

The Australian Government will work through these implications with the states and territories as an urgent priority.

Further information about the rollout will be provided as soon as possible.

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