

Date: March 27th 2014

Australasian Medical Research Societies call on Federal Government to implement promised changes to strengthen the childhood vaccination incentive program.

News Release.

Vaccination represents one of the safest and most effective means of protecting our children against a range of devastating diseases, and its effectiveness in maintaining disease control, including protection of unvaccinated individuals, depends on the majority of the community being immunised (herd immunity). Herd immunity helps protect babies and young children prior to them being fully vaccinated, and also the sick or elderly with reduced immune function and those individuals who, for legitimate medical reasons, cannot be vaccinated.

The National Health Reporting Authority report on immunisation rates, released today, shows that while policies aiming to achieve high vaccination rates are working in many locations, there remain areas where vaccination rates are low. In some regions of Australia, over 7% of families are registered as conscientious objectors, and the report shows that these regions correspond with pockets of reduced vaccination uptake. These figures suggest that Government policies on conscientious objection contribute to local deficiencies in vaccination and in immunity to vaccine-preventable diseases.

The current system in which parents can refuse vaccinations for their children yet still receive the vaccination incentive, the Family Tax Benefit Part A Supplement, sends a mixed message to the community and ultimately endangers lives. Under this policy, the rate of conscientious objection increased by over 600% between 1999 and 2012.

In May 2013, then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott promised that if his government is elected, parents who, without a legitimate medical reason, choose to not vaccinate their children, will no longer receive the Family Tax Benefit Part A Supplement. The intention of this policy was to boost vaccination rates in Australian children, and it received the full support of the Australasian Virology Society, the Australasian Society for Immunology, and the Australian Society for Microbiology. Then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced in August 2013 his support for such a policy change.

To date, the Australian Federal Government has not implemented the promised changes. We, representing the Australian medical research societies listed below, call on the Government to implement its promise to encourage parents to vaccinate their children by making this a requirement for the Family Tax Benefit Part A Supplement, unless there is a legitimate medical reason to not do so.

Other measures to encourage further increases in vaccination uptake are necessary. For example, indigenous and socially isolated Australians continue to have lower vaccination rates. One way to address this is to develop a system of home visits by vaccination providers, along with further public education into the safety and efficacy of this important form of preventative medicine. We encourage the government to use the funds saved through this policy change to support these additional activities and increase protection against vaccine-preventable diseases.

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Our respective scientific societies: The Australasian Virology Society, The Australasian Society for Immunology, and The Australian Society for Microbiology, collectively represent approximately 4000 members that include Australia and New Zealand's most prominent researchers, clinicians and scientists working with infectious diseases and the means for their prevention. We applaud government policy guided by solid scientific evidence.

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