

News release.

A very welcome agreement between the federal government and the opposition should help to increase vaccination rates and reduce the incidence of vaccine preventable diseases.

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The Australian Federal Government has announced that parents without a legitimate medical reason for choosing to not vaccinate their children will no longer receive the financial incentives designed to boost vaccination rates. Furthermore, this important policy change has received the full support by the opposition - something rarely seen in Australian politics of late. This measure is likely to increase vaccination rates and it receives the full support of the Australasian Virology Society, the Australasian Society for Immunology, the Australian Society for Microbiology and the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy.

In light of recent reports of measles outbreaks in Melbourne, we are reminded that measles, a vaccine preventable disease, is highly infectious and very dangerous. Individuals who have not been vaccinated, especially infants and young children, and individuals with impaired immunity due to other medical conditions, are especially vulnerable. Roughly one in ten children who contract measles end up in hospital with measles-related complications such as pneumonia, diarrhea and encephalitis and between 1-3% of these children may die.

Vaccination represents one of the safest and most effective means of protecting our children against a range of devastating diseases including, but not limited to measles. The effectiveness of vaccination 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 previous system in which parents could refuse vaccinations for their children yet still receive the incentive sent a mixed message to the community and ultimately endangered lives. Under the previous policy, the rate of conscientious objection increased by over 600% between 1999 and 2012. In some regions of Australia, 8% of families refuse vaccination, leading to serious deficiencies in immunity to diseases and pockets of disease outbreak.

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 new policy to support these additional activities and increase protection against vaccine-preventable diseases.

The government's proposal to withdraw financial incentive payment for conscientious objectors receives the full support of the network of Australasian scientific societies listed above. These

societies 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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