

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ON ADULT INFLUENZA VACCINATION



Campaign Overview: Australia

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Executive Summary

Australia has a comprehensive influenza immunization program that provides free vaccination to at-risk populations, including indigenous people; pregnant women; older adults aged 65 years and over; and those with chronic medical conditions.

To promote public awareness of influenza vaccination, the Federal Department of Health (DOH) launched a national campaign annually with information disseminated in form of the national immunization schedule, real-time news releases, hard-copied fact sheets and a consultation hotline.

This government-led campaign focuses on universal communication to the general public, yet messages specifically targeting older Australians and those with chronic conditions are relatively limited and / or difficult to locate amongst more generic messages. Despite the availability of fact sheets and posters for indigenous people and care providers, who are recognized as at-risk groups, specific educational resources for older persons and those with chronic diseases are largely absent.

The campaigns led by patient organizations and aging networks including Heart Foundation, Lung foundation, NSA and COTA respectively, as a complementary practice, are still underdeveloped. These agencies relied largely on single channel for disseminating messages. While they, to some extent, appreciate the broad value of vaccination and has recognized the critical nature of this public health intervention to its members, their communication methods could be limited in reach.

Demographic Details

In 2018 Australia had a population of ~24.9 million with some 15.7% (3.9 million) aged 65 years and over. The number and proportion of older Australians is expected to continue to grow. By 2050, the projected older population will double and reach ~7.4 million, representing 22.5% of the total population.¹

Alongside the marked demographic shift toward population ageing, the burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) is increasing. In 2016, NCDs accounted for 89.8% of all deaths, with cardiovascular diseases responsible for 28% of total deaths, followed by chronic respiratory diseases (7%) and diabetes (3%).²

Context

Influenza is a major cause of illness in the Australian community. In 2019, 214,377 influenza cases and 486 influenza-associated deaths were confirmed. The burden of seasonal influenza is particularly high in older adults, with some 38% hospital admissions and 75% of influenza-associated deaths in people aged 65 years and over in 2018.³ Despite that the influenza vaccine is the most effective way to protect against the infection an estimated one in three (32%) older Australians were not vaccinated in 2016-2017 and this trend continues.⁴

To promote public awareness of influenza vaccination, the Federal Department of Health (DOH) runs an annual national campaign sharing information through various channels including the vaccination schedule, fact sheets, and press releases on the status of the flu season. Although there are many resources and campaigns available at the State/Territory level, in order to keep consistent throughout the study, this country scan is confined at the national level.

While many patient associations and advocacy organisations such as Heart Foundation, Lung Foundation, National Seniors Association (NSA) and the Council of the Ageing (COTA) are promoting adult influenza vaccination to varying degree, none of them are doing so in a systematic and comprehensive way. A recent review of the publicly available websites

of 27 health promotion organisations (HPOs) in Australia found that only 3 agencies (National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, Immunisation Coalition and Diabetes Australia) had adequate information on the specific disease risks associated with influenza and the effectiveness and safety of the vaccine (unpublished study).

Government Campaign

National Immunisation Program

The National Immunisation Program (NIP) which was established in 1997 is funded by the federal government and implemented by state and territory departments of health with the goal of expanding coverage through free vaccines to eligible Australians.^{5,6}

Figure 1: National Immunisation Program schedule

Flu (influenza) vaccines

If you belong to any of the categories below, you are eligible to receive a free flu shot each year.

Flu (Influenza) vaccines

Aged	Comments
6 months and over with certain medical risk factors	This includes anyone aged 6 months and over who has: <ul style="list-style-type: none">heart diseasesevere asthma (requiring frequent medical consultations or use of multiple medications)chronic lung conditionsdiseases of the nervous system which affect your breathingimpaired immunitydiabeteskidney diseasehaemoglobinopathieschildren aged six months to 10 years on long-term aspirin therapy
All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 6 months and over	None
65 years and over	None
Pregnant women	Any trimester during each pregnancy

From the inception of NIP, influenza vaccine has been included and is free to Australians aged 65 years and over. Since 2000, the eligibility has expanded to include more at-risk populations for influenza and its complications, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 6 months and over; pregnant women; and those aged six months and over with certain medical conditions.

The NIP schedule is the official source of information on free vaccines for eligible Australians throughout their lives.

An important message implied in the schedule is that the annual influenza vaccination is recommended for and free of charge to Australians aged 65 years and over or those aged 6 months and over with certain medical condition such as heart disease, severe asthma, chronic lung conditions, impaired immunity, diabetes, kidney disease etc. Additional information regarding the NIP and general advice on immunisation can be obtained by calling the hotline established by the DOH.

Web page

The Australian Department of Health website contains basic information about influenza and immunisation services.

The section entitled “Flu (influenza)”⁷ was developed to educate readers on the serious nature and burden of influenza and the strategies to avoid and / or treat the disease. There is a brief introduction describing the biological characteristics, symptoms, risks, transmission, and diagnosis of influenza followed by a description of preventative actions and treatment. Through relatively simple language it touches on the key message that “people aged 65 years and over and those with chronic conditions are at highest risk of being hospitalized with flu” and “vaccination is the best protection against the flu”.

“Flu (influenza) immunisation service”⁸ incorporates supplementary information on influenza vaccination about the benefits, suggested recipients, location, time, age-specific vaccine options, costs and possible side effects.

The section entitled “Immunisation for seniors”,⁹ reinforces once again the vaccination recommendation for adults aged 65 years and over.

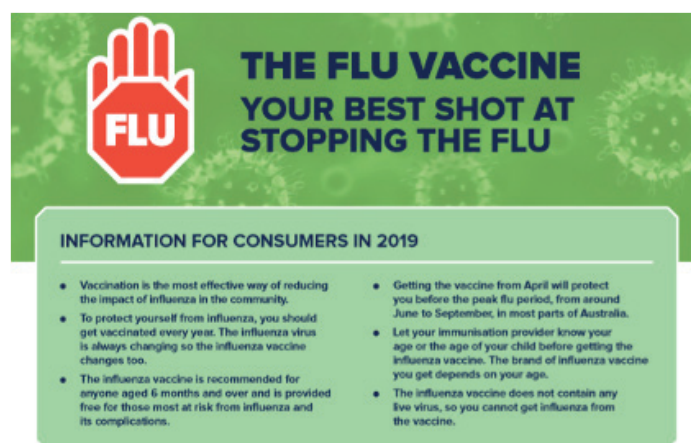
Fact sheet

Fact sheets for the general public about influenza and vaccines supplement web-based information from the federal department of health. The information is translated into 10 languages to improve reach and understanding in a wide range of communities.

“Your best shot at stopping the flu”¹⁰ is a fact sheet that provides comprehensive information about influenza and vaccination in the form of questions and answers. Questions include what is influenza, why / when / where to have the influenza vaccine, who is eligible for the free influenza vaccine and why, and flu vaccine safety.

The specific impact of influenza on at-risk groups is also described in some detail and followed with the key message that influenza vaccines are age-specific and a conversation with the doctor is important to make an informed decision on the dose and type of influenza vaccine.

Figure 2: Fact sheet



News release

The DOH produces a series of news releases before and throughout the flu season to inform the general public and those most at-risk of the serious nature of influenza and the availability of flu vaccines.

Key messages from the DOH fact sheets such as the “annual influenza vaccination is the most important way to prevent influenza and its complications” are reinforced in the press releases.^{11,12} Eligible Australians are encouraged to make use of the free vaccine and to discuss with their doctor, whether an enhanced vaccine is recommended.¹³

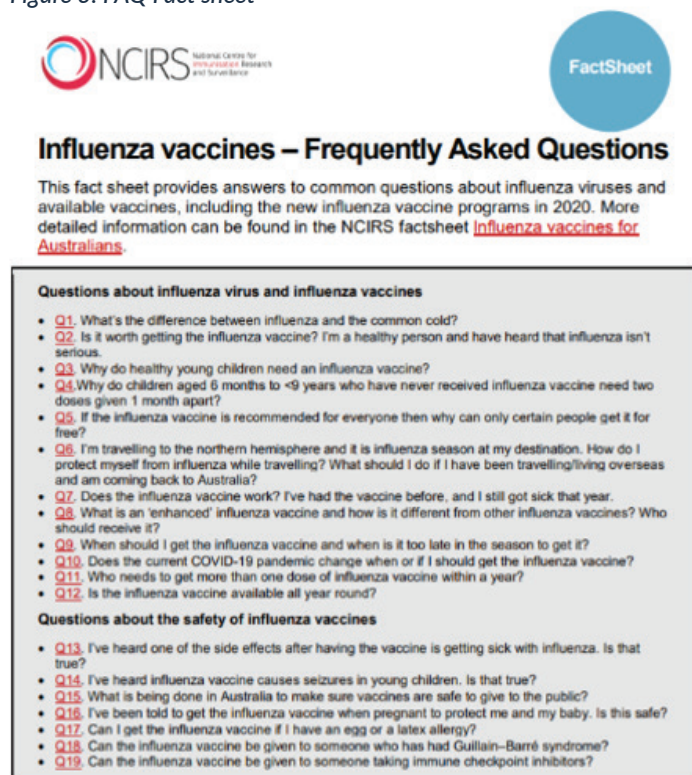
Non-government Organizations

National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance

As the leading research organisation in Australia that provides expert advice on vaccine preventable diseases and immunisation,¹⁴ the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) is making key contributions to the development of effective communication about influenza immunization by creating educational fact sheets.

The fact sheet “Influenza vaccines – frequently asked questions” provide responses to common questions about influenza viruses and available vaccines, including the influenza vaccine programs.¹⁵ The key message to motivate influenza vaccination in at-risk populations is that “the influenza vaccine is available free of charge under the government-funded National Immunisation Program (NIP) for all adults aged 65 years and older and people with certain underlying medical conditions.”

Figure 3: FAQ Fact sheet



Immunisation Coalition

As the leading voice in advocating for life-course immunisation in Australia, the Immunisation Coalition is dedicated to promoting public awareness regarding the importance of influenza vaccination by providing educational materials and informative communication programs.

Web page

Under the theme of “Be FluSmart”, the Immunisation Coalition shares influenza related facts on its website, including “influenza and heart attack”, “flu facts”, “who is at risk”, “flu and older adults”.¹⁶ Apart from stating the facts, scientific evidence is also been well cited and incorporated to add credibility to the information. To support the statement that influenza vaccine is beneficial for people with heart disease, research findings are cited – “extending vaccination each year has the potential to prevent: 1,482 heart attacks” and “save the Australian government up to \$31.4 million.”¹⁷ For older adults, the emphasis of the fact is that they are more vulnerable to severe consequences of influenza infection including hospitalization, serious complications such as pneumonia and heart attacks and even deaths.¹⁸ In the 2019 Influenza season in Australia, there is an enhanced vaccine provided under the NIP for people aged 65 and over.¹⁸

Video

The importance of influenza vaccination is stressed through several educational videos featured Professor Robert Booy, infectious diseases specialist and pediatrician at University of Sydney.¹⁹²⁰ In the video “The flu – It’s not a cold, it is a killer” Prof Booy explains how contagious the flu virus can be, how long the virus lasts, what can be done to prevent infection and of special note is that “vaccination is the best defense to stop contracting the virus.”

Professor Paul Van Buynder, public health physician on the Gold Coast, speaks about the importance of influenza prevention in residential care facilities.²¹ He urges on health care providers in residential care facilities the necessity of being vaccinated because influenza infection is more serious and may cause reduced functional ability in residents who are older persons living with chronic diseases but the vaccines works poorly in the very elderly.

Online survey

An online tool “Take the Flu Test” was developed by the Immunisation Coalition to help Australians determine the likelihood of having contracted influenza and decide whether to take the influenza shot.²² By completing the online survey, participants will know whether they develop flu-like symptoms, whether they fall into the high risk group for complications from influenza and what they should do next.

Figure 4: Online survey



The Heart Foundation

The Heart Foundation through public health messages on the organizational website and press releases communicates to its members and the general public the danger of influenza for Australians with a heart condition and the importance of annual vaccination in reducing the burden of heart.²³

The link between influenza and heart disease is clearly stated through messages such as “people with a heart condition are at a greater risk of becoming more seriously ill from the flu”²⁴ and followed by the statement that vaccine is a secondary strategy for reducing the burden of heart diseases.²⁵

Case story

Innovative communication of the life-threatening impact of influenza on patients with heart disease has been developed by the Heart Foundation through a case story. The unique story transmits powerful messages that the audience can relate to and in doing so be stimulated into action.

The case story features Jayden Cummins, whose condition of mild atrial fibrillation was managed with medication.²⁶ After experiencing severe complications associated with the flu, Mr Cummins’ heart was shutting down, along with his kidneys and

liver. These systemic deteriorations led to surgery where a battery-operated mechanical pump was inserted while he waited for a heart transplant. His near-death experience was a stark reminder of the potential exacerbation of heart disease and lengthy hospitalization due to influenza infection.

Lung Foundation Australia

The Lung Foundation Australia provides information about influenza on its website: prevention, diagnosis, symptoms, transmission and treatment, and the consequences of the disease on at-risk groups (including frail and older people and patients with chronic lung disease).²⁷

In addition to the online introduction to influenza, supplementary information about the relationship between influenza and other severe respiratory diseases was published in organizational press releases in 2019.

The Lung Foundation Australia details the risk of developing fatal pneumonia and exacerbation of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) after influenza infection. It urges those with chronic respiratory disease to be proactive and have the vaccination, in order to avoid not only the symptoms of the influenza itself but also the exacerbation of lung conditions.^{28,29}

Diabetes Australia

Web page

A brief description of influenza that brings attention to the severity and life-altering facts of influenza for those with diabetes is on the Diabetes Australia website.³⁰ Messages communicate facts such as influenza may interfere with the blood glucose level and as a consequence diabetics are three times more likely to be hospitalized and three times more likely to die than non-diabetics.

Diabetes Australia states the best way to prevent the flu is by being vaccinated each year while at the same time encouraging family and friends to do the same.

Infographic

An infographic was produced highlighting 5 recommended actions for Australians living with diabetes around the flu season. The flow of information briefly explains the reasons why people with diabetes and their families should have a conversation with their family doctor about the vaccine, reasons for them and their families to be vaccinated and when and for what reasons.³⁰

News release

Diabetes Australia encourages, through various news releases, all Australians with diabetes to take advantage of the free vaccination. Coupled with the call-for-action, the evidence-based statements about the life-threatening consequences of influenza in the press release are “People with diabetes are between three and six times more likely to be hospitalized as a result of influenza, and once hospitalized up to 92 times more likely to die” and “Influenza makes it more difficult for people to manage their diabetes and increases the risk of diabetic ketoacidosis and even death.”³¹

National Seniors Association

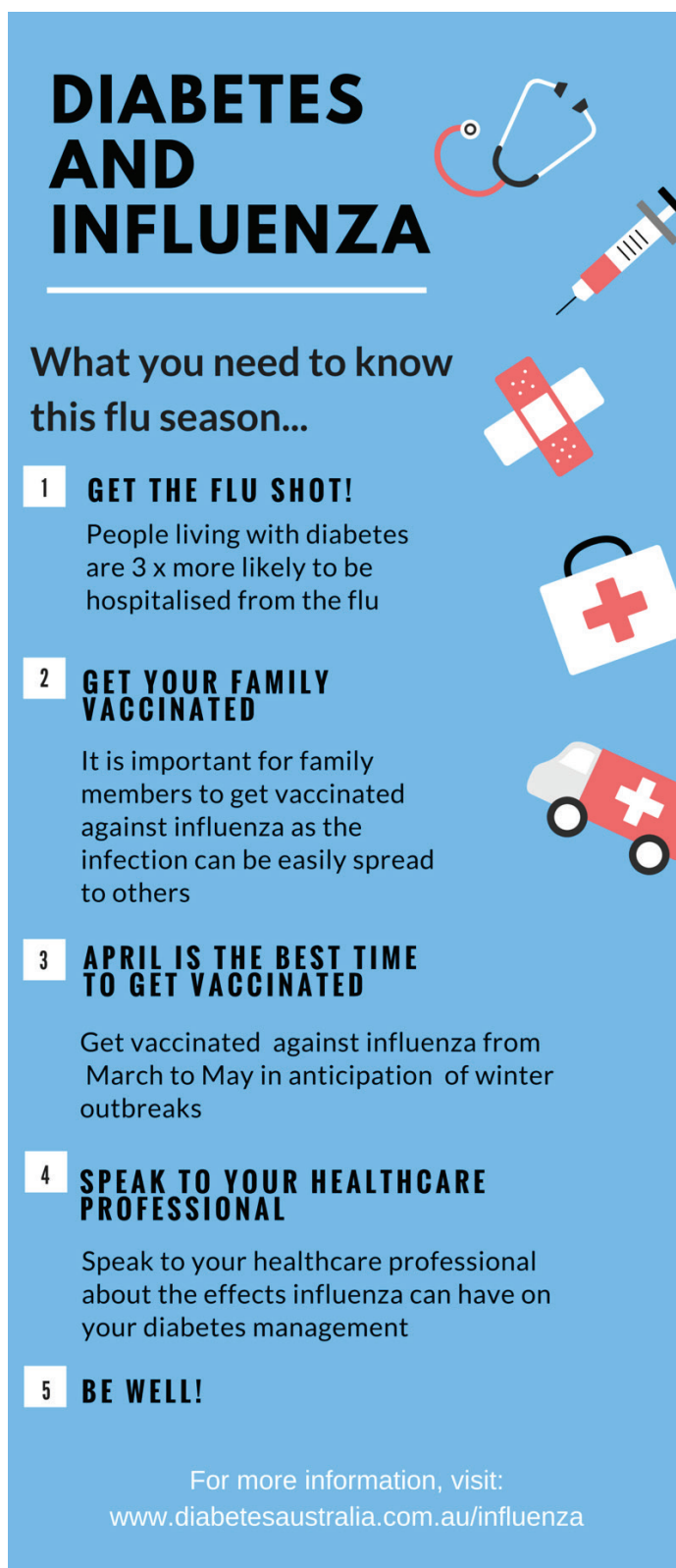
Since 2017, the National Seniors Association (NSA) has disseminated periodic news releases to inform their members and older Australians more broadly of the free flu vaccine and the availability of the enhanced vaccine to provide better protection.^{32,33,34,35}

In addition to putting emphasis on the susceptibility and threats of influenza among the older population, the NSA reminded older people to “Keep fit, eat well and be vaccinated”.³⁶

Council of the Ageing Australia

In response the Department of Health mandatory provision of influenza vaccines to all staff in residential aged care, the Council of the Ageing (COTA) Australia, through a news release, called on older Australians to take advantage of the free flu vaccination program and for all people who enter aged care facilities, including family members and visitors, to be vaccinated for the protection of residents.³⁷

Figure 5: Diabetes Australia Infographic



DIABETES AND INFLUENZA













What you need to know this flu season...

- 1 GET THE FLU SHOT!**
People living with diabetes are 3 x more likely to be hospitalised from the flu
- 2 GET YOUR FAMILY VACCINATED**
It is important for family members to get vaccinated against influenza as the infection can be easily spread to others
- 3 APRIL IS THE BEST TIME TO GET VACCINATED**
Get vaccinated against influenza from March to May in anticipation of winter outbreaks
- 4 SPEAK TO YOUR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL**
Speak to your healthcare professional about the effects influenza can have on your diabetes management
- 5 BE WELL!**

For more information, visit:
www.diabetesaustralia.com.au/influenza



Status of National Influenza Vaccination Campaign

Comprehensive policies and programs	Influenza vaccination is recommended by government and advisory bodies for at-risk populations including older adults and people with chronic diseases	
	Influenza vaccination is funded under the National Immunization Program (NIP) and administered through the state program for at-risk populations including older adults and people with chronic disease	
Clear communication strategy	Published context-specific communication strategy and action plan which defines communication goals, target audiences, expected roles of partner organizations, communication tools and timeline	
Well-defined audience	Universal message distributed to undifferentiated populations (general audiences regardless of age and underlying health condition)	
	Dedicated and tailored information for specific at-risk audience	
Multiple tools and channels	Online communication such as web content, digital technology, social media, online publications, email	
	Messages are disseminated offline by TV, radio, printout (e.g. leaflet, poster, brochure, outdoor ads)	
	Interactive communication including individual consultation, street campaign and face-to-face mobilization	
Realistic timeline	Timely flu season alert and vaccination reminder	
	National/regional events scheduled for intensive awareness campaign such as national vaccination day/week/month	
Regular updates of information	Information is updated on a regular basis to reflect the most recent evidence and policy, such as recommending newly licensed vaccines for specific recipient	
Engagement and support of civil society	Communication on influenza by patient associations, ageing organizations and advocacy groups	

 Well-developed
  Partially developed
  Not yet developed / No evidence

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