

## IMMUNISATION.....issues for the Byron Shire 2015

The decision for some parents about whether to immunise their children is very difficult. Many report that they are confused about the conflicting information they are presented with. It is not easy to be sure which information is backed by reliable scientific research. Parents often report their decision not to immunise results from the fear of causing harm to their child. In my experience vaccination for the vast majority of children is only a very temporary and minor discomfort, which they recover from very quickly. There is a lot of misinformation about vaccination. It is no wonder parents find this important decision so hard. The National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance NCIRS will provide parents with factual research backed information related to vaccination. [www.ncirs.usyd.edu.au](http://www.ncirs.usyd.edu.au)

Immunisation cannot offer a 100% guarantee that a child will be protected, but it is the very best and safest method we have available to protect a child against often deadly diseases. The Australian Government provides free vaccines to all children. All these vaccines have undergone rigorous scientific trials. The huge cost to provide free vaccination to all Australian children is weighed against the costs to care for those affected by the diseases and the human suffering and costs to families and community.

What has often been described as “vaccination reactions” are actually normal healthy immune responses to vaccines. Most commonly the responses are fairly mild and only last a day or two. They may include local redness and minor swelling at the site, mildly elevated temperature and some minor irritability for a day or two. These are normal human responses for anyone who has received a vaccine to provoke an immune response and produce antibodies that will hopefully be able to protect them against diseases. Since the introduction of new vaccines in recent years, health professionals have noted far fewer immunisation responses. Vaccines have never been better or safer.

Immunisation rates in the Byron Shire are the lowest in Australia, lower than World Health Organisation statistics for many third world countries. In the Mullumbimby area we have less than 50% vaccination rates for children, and only slightly higher in the rest of the shire. In a country like Australia with access to the best quality vaccines and health personnel to safely administer them, it is hard to understand why many reject one of the most significantly successful disease prevention strategies of the last century. Our beautiful region also attracts many tourists who travel from all over the world, including countries where deadly vaccine preventable diseases are still prevalent. Therefore there are significant risks in this region of exposure to vaccine preventable diseases, due to such poor “herd immunity” in our area. This causes significant risk for the few immunised children in our community who may not produce antibodies to diseases, despite vaccination, and any immunosuppressed people such as those having chemotherapy.

In the past few years in NSW we have seen significant outbreaks of confirmed cases of whooping cough. The Byron Shire continues to be a “hotspot” area for ongoing cases of the disease. In NSW in 2014 there were 3132 laboratory confirmed cases of whooping cough. In this year to July we have had 3841 cases of whooping cough notified in NSW, this is over double the number of cases for the whole of 2014. In the last 4 years on the North Coast over half the number of cases admitted to hospital with Whooping Cough, were babies less than 12 months old. NSW Health continues to strongly urge all parents, grandparents and those in close contact with children to have booster vaccinations, to help prevent unvaccinated adults passing on the disease to vulnerable young children.

We have also seen several local cases of measles which was thought to be close to eradication in Australia, due to Immunisation programs. Measles is a highly contagious disease which could spread rapidly in our area with such high numbers of people and children who are unvaccinated. Just 2 doses of MMR vaccine (measles, mumps, and rubella) can provide 99% immunity to measles. As a community we should actively promote better immunisation rates in our shire to protect our vulnerable newborns, children and immuno-compromised by not allowing these diseases to be spread so easily. Immunisation is the mainstay of whooping cough and measles control and provides good protection to those children in our region who receive it. If parents wish to have their children vaccinated at any age, an individual catch-up plan of vaccination can be arranged at any time. I would be very happy to discuss or assist any parents with immunisation queries.

Please feel free to contact either Marianne Trent – North Coast Area Health Service Immunisation Coordinator at the North Coast Public Health Unit on 66 207500, or myself Pam Walmsley - Clinical Nurse Specialist Grade 2 - Child Health Immunisation Coordinator for Byron Shire Phone: 02 66 870012