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Low immunisation figures putting everyone at risk of preventable diseases

Rapidly declining immunisation rates in Australia are putting communities at risk of pertussis, measles, mumps, rubella and swine flu, especially as the school year is about to get under way, says Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Chair Dr Emil Djakic.

"Immunisation rates for four year olds have reduced to about 83 percent – a seven year low, and they are likely to continue to drop," Dr Djakic said.

Australia aims to have an immunisation rate of 90 percent or above, a good coverage rate by international standards.

The vaccinations protect children from diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, mumps and rubella.

But Dr Djakic said the government's move to end the immunisation incentive scheme has led to a dramatic decline in immunisation rates, with no likely recovery.

"We warned the government when they decided to axe the immunisation incentive scheme that the rates of immunisation would decrease, and it appears that the recent figures prove our point," said Dr Djakic.

The scheme funded General Practitioners to set up recall and reminder systems in their practices to encourage parents to bring their four year old in for their shots.

"The best defense against these illnesses is vaccination. Last year children presented to general practices with illnesses that could have been prevented," said Dr Djakic.

The risk to community is high, a pertussis epidemic on the east coast of the country last year led to the death of one child and severe illness for many more.

Children not vaccinated also pose a severe threat of passing on the illness to pregnant women, older or obese people and Indigenous Australians, with potentially tragic consequences.

"These illnesses are often much worse for adults, and adults with a chronic condition are at a high risk of serious complications," Dr Djakic said.

Influenza H1N1 (swine flu) is still a concern for Australia, with the return to school likely to see a resurgence in those young people affected, unless vaccinated.

Dr Djakic strongly encouraged all parents of children starting school this year to have their four year old vaccination completed before school begins.

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