

**News Release: 28 August 2019**

## **AUSTRALIA'S 2019 'FLUNAMI' YET TO PEAK – NOT TOO LATE TO VACCINATE**

### **Experts warn of high influenza heart attack toll**

- *There is low public awareness of influenza's potential to trigger heart attacks*
- *A person is 6x more likely to have a heart attack the week following influenza compared to the year before or after the infection<sup>1</sup>*
- *Flu vaccination has been shown to reduce the risk of heart attack by up to 45%<sup>2</sup>*
- *Research finds vaccinating 50-64 year olds will prevent 1,500 heart attacks<sup>3</sup>*

Sydney, Australia – 28 August 2019: As Australians endure one of the worst flu seasons on record, with over 228,000<sup>4</sup> confirmed cases and 486<sup>5</sup> deaths to date, experts are stepping up warnings on the significant risk of heart attacks and need for those with cardiovascular disease risk factors (of all ages) to be vigilant and vaccinated.

While influenza is known for pneumonia, hospitalisation and loss of life,<sup>6</sup> few understand its potential to trigger heart attacks.<sup>7</sup> Yet an estimated one in four lives lost this year to influenza will be related to coronary heart disease.<sup>8</sup>

In an unprecedented move – mid flu season - experts from the Immunisation Coalition are urging Australians to get vaccinated if they haven't already done so – to protect themselves and their hearts.

Associate Professor Tim Tan, Department of Cardiology, Blacktown Hospital, says, "The risk to our hearts from influenza is very high. We know a person is six times more likely to have a heart attack the week following an influenza diagnosis, compared to the year before or after the infection.<sup>1</sup>"

"We also know Australians who have not had a flu vaccination are almost twice as likely to have a heart attack compared to those who have been vaccinated.<sup>7</sup> So it is critical those at risk – particularly with cardiovascular disease such as heart failure and those with a previous heart attack; and chronic illness such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or diabetes, seek vaccination. Our significant concern is the rates of flu vaccination in the under 65s – which remain very low at just 30%.<sup>2</sup> It's important to act now - it's not too late," adds A/Prof Tim Tan.

#### **Vaccination protects against heart attacks**

The value of influenza vaccination has been reinforced through new research undertaken by the University of NSW which shows extending vaccination nationally to 50-64-year-olds (under the National Immunisation Program) could protect almost 1,500 Australians from having a heart attack and save the Government up to \$31 million.<sup>3</sup>

Flu vaccination has been shown to reduce the risk of a heart attack by up to 45%.<sup>2</sup> This brings it in line with other recognised cardiovascular prevention measures:<sup>2</sup>

- smoking cessation (32-43% risk reduction)
- cholesterol lowering medication (19-30% risk reduction)
- blood pressure medication (17-25% risk reduction)

The body's immune response to the influenza virus – not only generates fever, aches and chills, but also the release of special immune chemicals called cytokines. It's these cytokines

that increase the risk of blood clots which can block the coronary arteries - limiting blood supply to the heart and causing a fast or irregular heartbeat.

Bill Stavreski, General Manager Heart Health, Heart Foundation says, "It's important people also appreciate the symptoms of a heart attack such as nausea, chills, aches and sweats can masquerade as signs of influenza and vice versa. Any of these symptoms – particularly in at risk groups must not be taken lightly - especially where there is a history of cardiovascular disease. Medical attention should be sought immediately."

"Flu vaccinations are a critical step in the management of cardiovascular disease, particularly for patients who have heart failure or who have had a heart attack. It's important this is integrated into community health prevention programs and that eligible Australians with heart disease are well informed," he added.

"It's never too late to be vaccinated, we have seen the influenza season carry through well into summer. I believe if you have not been vaccinated this year – particularly if you have risk factors such as heart disease, respiratory conditions, are a smoker or have diabetes, it is very important to act now for protection against influenza and also to protect your heart," says Associate Professor Tim Tan.

The flu vaccine is provided free under the National Immunisation Program for those most at risk – including 65+ and those with conditions such as heart disease, chronic respiratory conditions, chronic illnesses, and impaired immunity.<sup>6</sup>

**Issued on behalf of the Immunisation Coalition by Cube. For further information, please contact Anne-Marie Sparrow on 0417 421 560 or Michaella Porter on 0488 217 191.**

#### Available for interview

- **Professor Raina MacIntyre** – Head of Biosecurity Research Program, Kirby Institute, UNSW
- **Associate Professor Tim Tan** – Department of Cardiology, Blacktown Hospital
- **Professor Dominic Dwyer** – Clinical Professor, Medicine, Westmead Clinical School, Institute for Clinical Pathology and Medical Research
- **Bill Stavreski** – General Manager Heart Health, Heart Foundation

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