
AMA Response to Questions on Notice: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, 29 January 2021

AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, provided expert testimony to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 on 29 January. There were two additional written questions on notice from Senator Rachel Siewert which the AMA has provided answers to below.

Question: What is the best strategy for reducing vaccine hesitancy and ensuring sufficient take-up of the covid-19 vaccine?

AMA Response

Fundamentally, the population must have confidence in any COVID-19 vaccine and we are fortunate that a suite of vaccines will soon be available that are both safe and efficacious.

We support the measured approach being taken by the TGA to thoroughly assess vaccine candidates before giving them full approval. This contrasts with the approach taken in some overseas countries where emergency approvals have been granted. While we recognise the pressure these countries face, the Australian approach is likely to encourage higher take up in the longer term.

There is an important distinction between vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccine behaviour. For example, there are many people in the community with low levels of health literacy who may be reluctant to receive a vaccination because they may have difficulty understanding the wide-ranging, often complex, and constantly changing information (and misinformation) regarding vaccination. It is important that people are directed to easily accessible, reliable health information that is culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Beyond the Commonwealth's plans for a mass media campaign and information available on the health.gov.au website, state and territory Governments must collaborate with the Commonwealth to extend the current Healthdirect website to provide an accessible, national source of verified health information. The Victorian and Queensland Governments currently do not contribute any funding to Healthdirect. This information must be culturally appropriate, and available in languages other than English.

It is important that Australians get their health information from trusted sources such as those listed above, as alternative sources can magnify health misinformation campaigns. As people can easily absorb misinformation delivered directly to them through advertising, celebrity influencers, and people in positions of power. More information on health literacy is available in the AMA's [Health Literacy Position Statement](#).

The role of GPs will also be critical. While the Government will make available specific COVID-19 vaccination items through the Medicare Benefits Schedule, appropriate co-claiming of other Medicare items must be encouraged for those patients that require additional information and advice about the merits or otherwise of a COVID-19 vaccination for their particular circumstances.

The Commonwealth also needs to continue to work directly with peak medical bodies to ensure that information is reaching general practice and other immunisers and that the information being provided is what is needed to support the roll out as well as their patients.

While the number of vaccination sites will initially be limited due to supply constraints and other factors, it will be important for the Commonwealth to ensure that once these issues are resolved, COVID-19 vaccines are available through all general practices that wish to administer the vaccine. Easy access to the vaccine and the trusted support and information that a patient's usual GP can provide will encourage better take up among the population.

Question: What are your views on state governments using a covid-19 vaccine as a requirement for entry into certain venues and government buildings? Is this an effective strategy to encourage vaccine take-up?

AMA Response

In general, vaccines should only be given to individuals with appropriate consent. While the AMA has, on occasion, supported the linkage of vaccinations to the payment of Commonwealth benefits, this approach or any form of mandatory vaccination is not warranted in relation to COVID-19.

Instead, extensive efforts should be made to foster trust in the community and encourage voluntary uptake of a COVID-19 vaccination. This is particularly important for reassuring the public about vaccine safety, recognising that some people may have concerns about the rapid development of potential COVID-19 vaccines compared to the traditional vaccination development timeline.

FEBRURARY 2021

Contact

Nicholas Elmitt
Policy Adviser
Australian Medical Association