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Over 18,000 hospital beds taken up by influenza each year according to new ISG report

Experts warn: influenza places an immense burden on Australian healthcare systems

14 March 2007: A new report launched by the Influenza Specialist Group (ISG) today reveals that on average influenza results in 18,000 hospital admissions and over 300,000 GP consultations each year in Australia – many of which could be prevented.¹

Dr Alan Hampson OAM, World Health Organization (WHO) consultant and Chair of the ISG, said that the report helped dispel many of the myths that influenza wasn't serious and does indeed place an inordinate and intense burden on Australia's healthcare systems during the winter months.

"Every year most of the burden from influenza occurs over about a six week period," said Dr Hampson. "When you think that the majority of the 18,000 people hospitalised will be admitted within this period – and that there are around 2,000 more hospitalisations each year for influenza than there are for type 1 diabetes – you begin to see the severe burden this disease is placing on our healthcare systems annually."

The report commissioned by the ISG, utilises data from the Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) database and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) National Hospital Morbidity Database, to determine the average number of hospitalisations and GP consultations for influenza in all age groups. The report found that each year on average, influenza related illness:¹

- causes 18,000 hospitalisations
- requires over 300,000 GP consultations
- costs the Australian Government at least \$85m – a cost that is largely preventable and primarily borne by the Australian tax payer.

"The total burden upon the community will in fact be much higher than this, because in addition to the cost of hospitalisations and GP consultations, there are also considerable costs associated with laboratory tests, emergency visits and medications, let alone the personal and cost to the economy with days taken off work and so forth," said Dr Hampson.

"Every winter hospitals plan ahead and healthcare professionals work extremely hard in order to contend with the huge burden that influenza places on healthcare resources," said Prof Bill Rawlinson, Medical Virologist, SEALS, Prince of Wales Hospital. "One important way healthcare professionals can help reduce this burden placed on them, is to get vaccinated against influenza – this not only helps protect them from contracting influenza, but also of spreading the disease to their patients."

Prof Rawlinson went on to say that the report came at a critical time, when influenza vaccination among Australians aged under 65 who are at-risk of medical complications from influenza remains at an unacceptably low rate of 42 percent – despite Australia being one of the world leaders in vaccinating those aged 65 or over.³ In 2006, over 85 percent of recorded influenza cases in Australia were in people under 64 years of age, therefore it is vital that the uptake in this age group is increased.⁴

“Even if someone appears fit and healthy, if they have a pre-existing condition such as diabetes, severe asthma and other lung conditions, a heart condition, kidney disease or weakened immune systems, it can be very hard for their body to fight influenza and also deal with the ongoing pressures of their condition,” said Prof Rawlinson. “Therefore, it is just as important for these people to get vaccinated as it is for someone over 65 years of age.”

It has been a few years since there has been a major influenza outbreak in Australia, yet the WHO estimates that worldwide there are between three and five million cases of seasonal influenza and between 250,000 to 500,000 deaths each year.⁵ In Australia, influenza infections typically start to increase in June, peaking between July and September. However, outbreaks sometimes start earlier and it takes two weeks for full immunity to develop after vaccination.

For those who do develop influenza, the ISG recommends a range of steps to help protect your own health and that of those around you:

- stay at home if you are ill, seeking medical support when required
- cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing
- regular hand washing
- if you are able to see a GP within 48 hours of the symptoms starting, antiviral treatments can be used to lessen the impact of infection and therefore the spread of the disease.

“Getting vaccinated early against influenza is the single, most effective way to minimise the risk of contracting the disease, which can cause severe complications that lead to hospitalisation or even death,” said Prof Rawlinson. “If you are 65 years of age or over or fall into one of the at-risk groups, the ISG recommend that you visit your GP now to protect yourself and others, before the influenza season begins.”

— ENDS —

NOTE: The ISG is demonstrating how many hospital beds are taken up with influenza at 9:45 am on **Wednesday 14 March** at the Sydney Cricket Ground, Driver Avenue, Moore Park.

If you would like to attend or receive information about this event, please contact:

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Editor's notes:

The ISG report:

- Full copies of the ISG report will be available from 14 March 2007 at: www.fightflu.com.au
- The report was commissioned by the ISG and undertaken in February 2007, to determine the burden influenza places on Australian healthcare systems and the cost associated with excess hospitalisations and GP consultations. The report utilised data from all age groups (0 years - death) and all costs were reported in 2005 values.
 - The Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) database was used to ascertain influenza related GP consultations over the period April 2000 to March 2006. Costs were determined using Medicare consultation costs.
 - The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) National Hospital Morbidity Database was used to ascertain influenza related hospitalisations over the period July 1998 to June 2005. These were based on modelling of excess hospitalisations during the influenza season. Costs were determined by examining the Australian Refined Diagnosis Related Group (AR-DRG).
 - A sensitivity analysis was undertaken to determine the key parameters driving the costs and to ensure data variance from year to year was taken into account.

The ISG:

The ISG consists of medical and scientific specialists from around the Australia and New Zealand with an interest in influenza. The ISG is Chaired by Dr Alan Hampson, former Deputy Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza. Dr Hampson was instrumental in the formation and development of the ISG and now continues in a consultancy role with the Australian Government, WHO and the National Influenza Pandemic Action Committee (NIPAC). Dr Hampson is a Consultant Virologist, and consults through Interflu Pty Ltd. The ISG receives funding from industry and the Commonwealth Government has also committed financial support to fund the group's influenza issues monitoring.

References

1. Newall, A et al. Economic report into the cost of influenza to the Australian health system. March 2007
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Separation, patient day and average length of stay statistics by principal diagnosis in ICD-10-AM, Australia; 1998-99 to 2004-05. Available at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/cognos/cgi-bin/ppdscgi?DC=Q&E=/ahs/principaldiagnosis9899-0405>
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2004 Adult vaccination survey. Available at: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/phe/avssr04/avssr04.pdf>
4. The Division of Communicable Disease Control. Avian influenza newsletter. Issue 7; November 2005
5. Australian Department of Health and Ageing. National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System: Number of notifications of influenza (laboratory confirmed), Australia, 2006 by age group and sex. 2006 [cited 20/02/07]. Available at: http://www9.health.gov.au/cda/Source/Rpt_5.cfm.