



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER

Dear Colleague

Prevention of pertussis in young infants

I am writing to advise you of measures to protect infants from pertussis.

Australia has experienced an epidemic of pertussis since mid 2008. Between 1 January 2008 and September 2011, seven infants have died of pertussis, all of whom were under the age of three months. The current epidemic is prolonged, with increased pertussis activity continuing in 2011 in some states.

To provide direct protection to infants as early as possible, the vaccine due at two months of age can be given as early as six weeks. Subsequent doses should be administered at four months and then at six months of age, according to the National Immunisation Schedule.

Indirect protection of young infants can be provided by minimising their exposure to pertussis. Australian data indicate that young infants acquire pertussis most commonly from their mother, their father or young siblings. With respect to young siblings, the first booster dose on the Schedule is at three-and-a-half to four years of age and should not be delayed.

Given the current high rates of pertussis in the community, several states and territories are temporarily providing free pertussis immunisation programs for parents of newborns and, in some cases, grandparents and other household contacts. I encourage you to discuss vaccination with couples planning a pregnancy, new parents and other close contacts of new babies including grandparents. While the evidence for adult immunisation in preventing transmission to infants is limited, immunisation of adults will assist in reducing disease in those immunised.

Pertussis is a notifiable disease and when suspected or confirmed, it is important to ascertain whether a young infant may be in contact with such a case, as preventative antibiotic treatment will be indicated. General practitioners are best placed to identify when this may be the case and preventative antibiotics can be facilitated by urgent notification to local Public Health authorities.

The enclosed brochure and poster provide further information to assist your discussions with patients. Copies are also available through the Immunise Australia Call Centre on 1800 671 811 or the Immunise Australia website: www.immunise.health.gov.au

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'C J Baggoley'.

Professor Chris Baggoley
Australian Government Chief Medical Officer