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Media Release

COVID preparedness by residential aged care providers under the spotlight

There is no excuse for any residential aged care service to be under-prepared for COVID-19.

More than 4 years after COVID-19 was first detected in Australia, every aged care provider should know what they need to do to reduce the risk of, prepare for, and minimise the impact of a COVID-19 outbreak. Providers are expected to have in place the necessary systems and processes to fulfil their obligations and safeguard residents' health and wellbeing as far as possible.

Ensuring residents' easy access to periodic COVID-19 vaccinations is a vital component of a provider's comprehensive COVID-19 management plan.

Aged Care Quality and Safety Commissioner Janet Anderson said all residential aged care providers had been put on notice to ensure timely access to COVID-19 vaccinations for residents, and to have robust infection prevention and control measures in place to reduce the risk of an outbreak over the winter period.

"Supporting residents to understand the benefits of vaccination and to get vaccinated is a responsibility of residential aged care providers, working with local General Practitioners (GPs), community pharmacists, and the local Primary Health Network," the Commissioner said.

Residential aged care homes with low COVID-19 vaccination rates raise questions for the Commission about whether those in charge of those homes are focusing enough on protecting older people in their care from serious disease.

"We are concerned about the proportion of aged care residents who are not up to date with their COVID-19 vaccinations. Timely access to vaccination should be part of routine clinical care for every older person," the Commissioner said.

The Commission is planning to conduct unannounced site visits to residential care homes with low COVID-19 vaccination rates to determine the reasons for this situation and the efforts that providers are making to address it.

"Where we find that a provider lacks interest and/or capability to take the necessary action, and their ongoing inattention to this vital preventative measure is placing residents in harm's way, there will be regulatory consequences," the Commissioner said.

Old age is the biggest risk to becoming seriously ill with COVID-19, and people living in residential aged care are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 infections. Vaccination remains the most important measure to protect against severe disease, and that's why it is important for older people to stay up to date with their COVID-19 vaccinations. Up-to-date vaccination includes having had a booster dose in the last 6 months. There is no longer a requirement for someone to wait a minimum time between their last COVID-19 infection and having a COVID-19 vaccination.

“I urge anyone living in aged care, their family and friends to carefully consider getting vaccinated against COVID-19 and keeping boosters up to date to aid protection against both infection and severe disease. It is also really important for aged care workers to get vaccinated to protect themselves and the older people they care for,” the Commissioner said.

In addition to unannounced visits, the Commissioner will be writing to those providers with low resident vaccination rates to remind them of their obligations.

People living in aged care who want to get vaccinated should speak to their aged care provider, GP or pharmacist about making arrangements. If that doesn't work, or they don't feel comfortable doing that, they should contact the Commission on 1800 951 822.

The Commission's Regulatory Bulletin on COVID-19 vaccination in residential aged care homes is available on the Commission's website at: www.agedcarequality.gov.au/resource-library/regulatory-bulletin-2024-24-covid-19-vaccination-residential-aged-care-homes

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