Letter to the editor

Availability of the northern hemisphere influenza vaccine for Australians travelling overseas

Dear Editor,


Drs Ratnam et al. raise the issue of respiratory infection, particularly influenza, as a risk to travellers while overseas. In their study of 621 Australians travelling to Asian countries, they report that 6.9% (43/621) contracted either confirmed influenza or an influenza-like infection. Influenza can cause serious illness but even with milder symptoms it can spoil holiday or business plans and cause considerable inconvenience and expense. It should be necessary to source medical assistance in a foreign country or re-schedule flights and accommodation.

Australians are encouraged by health authorities to update their influenza vaccination prior to overseas travel. However, the only influenza vaccine available in Australia is designed specifically for the southern hemisphere strains and may be less well matched to the influenza strains circulating in northern hemisphere countries. In 2012 the Australian influenza vaccine comprised A/Perth/16/2009 (H3N2) and B/Brisbane/60/2008-like virus while the northern hemisphere vaccine contained different strains, A/Victoria/361/2011 (H3N2) and B/Wisconsin/1/2010. The A/H1N1 components were the same. The northern hemisphere vaccine was determined by the World Health Organization as the optimal match.

Herein lies the problem. The northern hemisphere influenza vaccine is not available in Australia. Effectively, clinicians who follow health department advice do so in the knowledge that the vaccine they offer travellers may not be appropriately matched to circulating northern hemisphere strains. Compounding this concern is that between November and March, availability of any influenza vaccine in Australia is problematic as the supply from one season is exhausted and the new season’s vaccine remains under development.

In 2012 an estimated 8.2 million Australian residents travelled overseas. During pre-travel health checks an opportunity exists for medical practitioners to offer vaccines targeting the diseases most likely to be encountered. However, when a poorly matched influenza vaccine is used, the patient is inadequately protected. Furthermore, should an immunised traveller contract influenza while overseas this undermines confidence in the value of vaccination.

In 2012, the influenza vaccine specifically developed for the northern hemisphere was not available to Australians travelling overseas during the northern winter. Additionally, the situation may exist in reverse, with limited availability of southern hemisphere vaccine for those travelling to Australia.

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Competing interests

Nil.

Ethical approval

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References


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