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media release

Whooping cough still on increase

Hunter New England Health is reminding parents to ensure their children are fully immunised against whooping cough (pertussis) following a large increase of cases in the region and across the state.

People working with or caring for young children (particularly parents and grandparents) should have a booster immunisation to reduce the chance of spreading the disease. NSW Health has arranged for a free vaccination for all new parents, grandparents and people who care for new babies - available now from GPs.

Year to date there have been 500 cases notified in the HNE Health region compared to 57 for the same time period in 2008 and 58 in 2007.

The same increase is being reflected across the state. For the months of Jan/Feb there have been 3,356 cases in NSW compared to 448 for the same period in 2008. No deaths have yet been recorded in the HNE Health region.

Traditionally the number of cases also increases in the winter months.

HNE Health Public Health Physician Dr David Durrheim said whooping cough can be a serious disease for people of any age, but it can be particularly serious in babies.

"Pertussis is very infectious and can easily be spread among people who have close contact. Many babies with whooping cough catch it from a parent or close family member," Dr Durrheim said.

"We have had a number of hospitalisations this year in our region with babies and young children with pertussis."

"Unfortunately being vaccinated or having had whooping cough does not provide lifelong immunity. Therefore many people who care for young children no longer have immunity even if they were vaccinated as children."

"Women that contract whooping cough in the last weeks of their pregnancy may pass it on to their vulnerable newborn child if they are not diagnosed and treated."

Coughing then develops into bouts which may be followed by a deep gasp or 'whoop'. Young children may stop breathing during the coughing attacks and require hospitalisation.

"The best way to protect babies is to keep them away from anyone with a cough to make sure their immunisations are up to date, and to make sure others in the household are vaccinated," he said.

"Vaccinations for pertussis are given at two, four and six months of age. In light of the current epidemic, parents and GPs are asked to consider bringing the first dose forward to six weeks of age to provide earlier protection," Dr Durrheim said.

A booster should be given at four years of age and again at 15-years of age. This is free from your GP.

Further information on whooping cough can be found on the NSW Health website at: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/pertussis.html>

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