

ISSUES PAPER:

A COVID-19 vaccine. Health consumers' views

Although a vaccine for COVID-19 is not yet available, it's high on the news agenda this week and keenly anticipated.

According to peer-reviewed research published in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention journal, we need up to 80% vaccination to ensure herd immunity. Yet the results of an Australian study in April showed that 14% of Australian adults would reject or were unsure about having a COVID vaccine. It's also likely that some people will be ineligible for the vaccine for medical reasons.

This week Health Consumers Queensland asked health consumers from its COVID-19 Community of Interest:

- How could the population be encouraged to be vaccinated?
- What would you need to know before deciding whether or not to get a vaccination?
- What would motivate or stop you from getting one?

Health Consumers Queensland invited **Jane Sanders, a Principal Public Health Officer with Queensland Health's Immunisation Program**, which sits within the Communicable Diseases Branch of the Prevention Division to provide a brief overview about how vaccines work, and Australia's vaccine regulatory and monitoring processes.

Talking together, we identified issues and areas to address which would enable and encourage consumers to make informed decisions. The key recommendations from consumers are summarised below and examined in greater detail in this week's issues paper which has been tabled to Queensland Health.

Consumers identified key action points for Queensland Health

Get the communication and engagement right: Communications and engagement strategies which are meaningful, open, transparent and accessible should lie at the heart of a COVID-19 immunisation plan.

Involve consumers now: Amidst the urgency of developing a safe vaccine, there is still opportunity for the health system to proactively partner with consumers to co-design communications and communications engagement rather than instigating a reactive, tick-box exercise once plans are underway.

Build and maintain people's trust: Health leaders are trusted more than politicians to deliver key public health messages; provide easy to access information; offer reputable sources of that information; respect people's right to make their own informed decisions; it's ok not to have all the answers; offer opportunities to talk things through with trusted health professionals.

Instil confidence in the regulatory process: Introduce innovation in the implementation and rollout of a programme but do not fast-track or circumvent testing and approvals protocols.

Provide clarity: Who would receive a vaccine first and how will it be made accessible to these priority communities.

Think long-term: Continue to provide other options and maintain key messaging about other methods of reducing infection.

Key issues for consumers

Principles and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none">When determining policy and communication about a possible COVID-19 vaccination, consumers would value the adoption of these principles: Openness, transparency, simple to understand, non-judgemental, fairness, meaningful engagement, consumer-led/responsiveness to consumer needs and wishes.
Involve consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">We have time for consumers to partner in developing policy, processes and communications for a COVID-19 vaccination.Involve many consumers, often, and in many different levels of the system.Partner with consumers to identify community leaders and community associations who could support information sharing, interpretation and roll-out of a programme.
Build and maintain trust through communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Health leaders e.g. Queensland's Chief Health Officer, are trusted more than politicians and should deliver key public health messages and information about a potential vaccination programme. "Politicians have got to be the bloody worst."Offer reputable sources for people to find the information they are looking for.The linked document provided by Queensland Health's Immunisation Program has a list of reputable government, non-government and internal websites which have information for consumers. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_uCkn2BjBjIG7_NU2xRM3nZffUr-UpfQ/view Is it possible to make this link a shorter link? And embed it in the words above?A carrot and stick approach will alienate consumers. "You can't just write people off for making these choices. We're not having consistent information and politicians are being very careful in their wording." said one consumer. Adopt an approach which respects and acknowledges people's right to make their own informed decision about vaccination.Enable consumers to be part of the conversation throughout this process – not just at the end.Be comfortable with not always having the answers.
DoH's response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jane was asked to respond to a comment about communicating with consumers who have concerns about immunisation. Her response was, "We do receive correspondence from people who are concerned about immunisation and we don't dismiss their concerns. We recognise everyone is coming from their own experience and perspective. We encourage people to do their own research and we

	<p>provide reputable sources. Ultimately people will still go and make their own decisions. There is rarely just one reason why people don't get vaccinated, it is easy to pigeon hole people when their reasons for not vaccinating might be related to access to services, family issues which mean immunisation is not a priority or other issues."</p>
Communication between health care professionals and consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align and coordinate communications and messaging for consumers and providers • Acknowledge the importance of individuals making the right personal decision by enabling health professionals to have the time to talk it through with patients during a routine appointment. – under the current Medicare schedule appointment timings, this is not long enough.
Information not misinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "How do we stop misinformation from scaring people?" asked one consumer. Provide easily accessible, reputable information in multiple formats, languages and through multiple online and offline channels and people. "Written info won't work for everyone."
Regulatory process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumers do not wholly trust the Therapeutic Goods Administration following a number of failings e.g. pelvic mesh. Advise consumers who is the watch dog for the watch dog. [Note: The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) is part of the Australian Government Department of Health, and is responsible for regulating therapeutic goods including prescription medicines, vaccines, sunscreens, vitamins and minerals, medical devices, blood and blood products.] • Given the urgency and scale of a potential COVID-19 immunisation programme, consumers must have absolute confidence that testing and approvals protocols are not being fast-tracked or circumvented. • "I would love to know where the gaps are in existing information and resources about clinical trials and regulation to educate consumers and the community." • Provide information which is accessible and provide sources for that information.
Policy/pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate what can be learned from other immunisation programmes, public health and community campaigns e.g. the current reduction in rates of influenza this year and the highly successful HIV and TB campaign • Make the vaccinations free (or free for those who can't access it otherwise). • Make it easy for consumers to access, from providers they already receive healthcare from. • Consider priority populations - who would be a priority to receive the vaccine first? Involve consumers in these discussions and decision-making. • How will at risk populations without access to regular health care providers be included in an immunisation programme? • How will mutations in the virus be monitored to ensure a vaccine is still effective?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will side-effects be monitored? • How will the information collected from monitoring be communicated to consumers/community?
Australia-wide issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visibility of State and Commonwealth agencies working together. • What is Australia's position given we are unable to manufacture a vaccine ourselves?
Public health response to long-term COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other than a COVID-19 vaccination, what are other options still available to us for long-term COVID-19 prevention? • Maintain key messaging about other methods of reducing infection including hand washing and social distancing