

# AHA African Community Forum with NSW Government: COVID-19 Vaccinations

## 24 March Forum Summary

The Forum offered an opportunity for the African Australian community, faith leaders and key influencers to discuss with NSW Government representatives the issues around Covid-19 vaccinations and keeping our community safe.



*Guiding question: What are the actual and perceived barriers and concerns that African communities face about being informed accurately, and accessing the COVID-19 vaccination program? What is the NSW Government's preparation and response to these?*

Welcome to Country	Dr Vincent Ogu
Acknowledgements	Chair, <i>Africa Health Australia</i>
Introduction	Joseph La Posta CEO, <i>Multicultural NSW</i>
A message from the NSW Government	Dr Jan Fizzell Senior Medical Advisor, <i>NSW Health</i>
Open Q & A	Dr Vincent Ogu

### Insights and messages from the Forum

#### NSW Government response and address

##### *Status of the pandemic*

- NSW is seeing the easing of restrictions; it is an optimistic but still a cautious time ahead. NSW recently had 55 days with no local transmissions.
- We cannot be complacent - we have been successful in navigating this pandemic. We want to continue to empower and inform the community, build and maintain trust in the response of health service professionals.
- Faith leaders have been vocal, active and positive about vaccinations, and this has been very influential. Greek Orthodox, Islamic and other faith leaders have said they will be 'first in line.' African community leaders can carry this role too.
- Many communities are still getting tested based on symptoms, and it remains important that we get tested. The consequences of avoiding testing when unwell can be devastating.
- Transmissible variants prevalent in Europe, Brazil, South Africa and UK are being seen through in-bound arrivals.
- Quarantine protection remains a focus. Even though restrictions are easing, we need to remember that an outbreak could be around the corner.

#### *Vaccine roll-out*

- The Federal and NSW governments have procured two excellent vaccines for every person in Australia, not just citizens. The vaccination is “our shield in the fight against Covid”. There is no first-class or second-class vaccine – both are heavily vetted with safety and trial research support.
- There will never be a fee for the vaccine, or for seeing doctors, pharmacists, or health clinics to get a vaccine. No one will be forced to take the vaccine.
- Priority order by risk; in NSW the greatest risk is border workers, looking after quarantines, and those in testing clinics.
- The Government remains open and transparent about allergic reactions and side effects. Allergic reactions happen with every vaccine, and are highly dependent on pre-existing conditions, patient allergies, and individual biochemistries. The Therapeutic Goods Administration looked at clinical trials and safety data, and other regulators have made their recommendations based on this research.
- The Astra-Zeneca vaccine was perceived to have caused blood clotting in overseas vaccination cases. It is understood now that these were coincidental, not causal. The patients in this case were found to have a history of blood clotting.

#### *When will we be vaccinated?*

- Currently 1,000 GP clinics are being outfitted with vaccine administration, and eventually 4000 clinics will come online. We are also prioritising aged care facilities, disability home care, state-led immunisation hubs, Aboriginal community service centres. Vaccines will be available and easy to get.
- Whilst you may not be at significant risk, we must still reduce the spread, and reduce the viral load. We are asking communities to continue to maintain physical distancing, use and encourage log in with QR codes, proper hand hygiene, get tested, and isolate if you feel unwell.

#### *Is the vaccine safe?*

- Consumers can report to **NPS MedicineWise 1300 134 237** any side effects. NSW Health is also following people who can report via SMS.
- Women especially – who are family health decision makers – need to receive targeted and reassuring messages. The vaccine is safe if breastfeeding, pregnant, if you were recently pregnant, or would like to get pregnant.
- The vaccine is safe before and during travel.
- For children, Australia requires clinical trials data before recommending the vaccine for children. We can be proud of the effort made in these trials, but they are not conclusive as a recommendation for children.

#### *What about privacy?*

- If the person is recommended by their employer as being eligible, they should get vaccinated. You may need to register for a health identifier, which connects you to NSW health records.
- You will not be obliged to tell your employer if you refuse the vaccine. If a person was not referred by their employer, a personal declaration can be made.
- A patient's vaccine information will not be used for anything else. It will be logged into a NSW Health database which is a secure

### Questions, barriers and concerns from the African community

- There is a strong need to be transparent and honest about the vaccination, what it is and what it is not. Need clear and non-technical messaging directly to communities in local languages.
- Community leaders feel that their communities need more information, and to be persuaded personally. Misinformation from overseas media and conspiracy theories online have disrupted the clear intent of Australian and NSW communication channels.
- NSW Health should be the source of truth on all COVID-19 pandemic and NSW management-related issues.  
*What communication channels are most effective?*
  - Social media and mass media have become only semi-trusted.
  - Written fact sheets and links can be too technical
  - + Multi-lingual GPs and a CALD GP register could be helpful for all sectors: patients, health and community service organisations, and health practitioners
  - + Non-English resources, especially African or smaller languages
  - + Short videos / GIFs of positive and trustworthy spokespeople. They can be played in community meetings, at home and discussed. Many people do not read and write in English or their native language.
  - + It is important to tailor messages to smartphones via direct messaging apps
  - + Clear simple language, with a diversity of voices and backgrounds.
- Why can't the NSW Government be more upbeat about addressing these issues? Although it is a serious issue, the messaging is sombre and sometimes fearful. By remaining downbeat, the Government is allowing conspiracy theories to go out of control. A strong, consistent and upbeat campaign would help greatly.
- Mass media communications are fine, but African communities are relationship-oriented and trust messages conveyed verbally. There is higher trust with community and faith leaders, and key influencers. But there is mistrust of messages on social media.
- Young people think they don't need to take the vaccine, and there are misperceptions that the pandemic is a hoax or not worth taking seriously. Community leaders should be firm and supported by Government messages and take this as a personal issue.
- Many African Australians trust overseas media, perhaps a bit too much. This may cause misperceptions or misunderstandings about Australia's response and the veracity of information.