

School immunisations lacking privacy



Inadequate levels of privacy afforded to South Australian children taking part in school-based immunisation programs has been highlighted as an ethical failing in new research released by the University of Adelaide.

The researchers sought to identify ethical issues in program delivery models by observing immunisation days at nine schools across the state and conducting interviews with student focus groups, parents, teachers and nurses.

Lead author and head of the university's school of population health, professor Annette Braunack-Mayer, said her team identified three key areas of concern: informed consent; restrictions on privacy; and harm to students in the form of fear and anxiety.

Braunack-Mayer said the public nature of the school settings created challenges for privacy and confidentiality.

"To manage the student flow, immunisations are typically conducted in gymnasiums or classrooms, where interactions between students and nurses can be seen and heard by others," she said. "A necessary question for the HPV vaccine is, 'Are you pregnant?', and the answer is sometimes overheard by peers."

South Australian Association of State School Organisations director David Knuckey said the research raised important concerns and that although schools were probably the best place to conduct immunisation programs, a review of school-based immunisation is appropriate.

"How it is done needs a rethink," he said. "Privacy and confidentiality are key risks. Today, any embarrassing information or incident can be shared school-wide in an instant, with social media, and then follow a child all through school. Given the epidemic of bullying, we must ensure we don't put children in situations that provide ammunition for ridicule and harassment."

Knuckey suggested that instead of having queues in school gymnasiums, each student could privately visit the school nurse. Whilst it might take longer, he argued, it would help safeguard privacy and self-esteem.

"A private environment would surely also help the nurses deal with psychological or emotional issues arising from the process," he added.

Researchers also found that in many cases the information provided to students and parents prior to

immunisation days was hard for many to understand and remember.

“This can affect their ability to make informed decisions,” Braunack-Mayer said. “A very small number of students were unwilling participants in the immunisation program, even though their parents had given permission. They had to be persuaded, usually very gently, to receive the vaccines.”

The authors concluded that overall the immunisation programs examined in the study – which included boosters for such conditions as diphtheria and tetanus, as well as immunisation for hepatitis B, chickenpox and three doses of the human papillomavirus vaccine (HPV) – were well organised and accepted with good uptake by students.

However, improvements in the areas of concern were recommended.

“It is important that we provide the best quality immunisation program we can for our students and the wellbeing of the wider community,” Braunack-Mayer said. “Identifying and addressing these challenges will help to ensure that school-based immunisation programs are both ethically acceptable and effective.”

The study was carried out in collaboration with the SA departments of education, health, and children’s services, the Adelaide Women’s and Children’s Hospital and pharmaceutical companies CSL and GlaxoSmithKline.