



Tamar Krebs (left), who runs Group Homes Australia, discusses immunisation with nurses Madonna Jackson and Anna Camilla Macale at an aged care home in St Ives. Picture: Tim Hunter

NSW

Anti-flu shots for staff would have saved elderly much suffering: minister

ROSE BRENNAN, EXCLUSIVE, The Daily Telegraph

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THE state government is training its sights on aged care workers who snub the flu vaccine, with Health Minister Brad Hazzard saying this year's horror influenza season could have been avoided if more staff got the jab.

With the state grappling with its worst flu season on record, Mr Hazzard will write to federal Health Minister Greg Hunt calling for free vaccines for aged care workers or force employers to pay for staff to be vaccinated.

“The simple fact is too many residents of aged care facilities are ending up caught up in this tsunami of flu,” Mr Hazzard said.

“We believe because unvaccinated staff and or family are bringing in flu that can be an absolute disaster for these folks.”



Nurse Madonna Jackson (left) said staff are happy to get the job as they realise it is protecting several stakeholders. Picture: Tim Hunter

A federal Health Department spokeswoman said: “There is a clear duty of care on aged care facility operators to ensure they do everything they can to provide the safest possible environment for their residents and carers.”

Mr Hazzard is also investigating how to boost vaccination coverage among hospital staff who are already offered free shots, especially those who work with vulnerable patients such as premature babies.

“People who work in health and aged care are generally miracle workers, amazing passionate people but sometimes they forget a simple quick injection could make a difference between their patients surviving or not surviving,” Mr Hazzard said.

The Immunisation Coalition says vaccination coverage can be lower than 40 per cent in aged care facilities while it’s also rare for more than half of hospital staff to be inoculated against influenza.

“Step one would be to educate the workers about benefits of vaccinations, step two is getting the federal government or employer to pay for the vaccination,” Mr Hazzard said.

“If the federal government paid for vaccination of all staff working in aged care facilities I have no doubt that in pure economic concerns, excusing the humanity of the decision, it would be far cheaper than taxpayers having to bear the enormous burden of elderly frail residents having to be cared for in hospitals across Australia.”

“Vaccination is key to trying to head off some of this tsunami.”

There have been 48,066 flu cases this year — a massive jump on the 22,359 at this time last year. And there have been 291 flu outbreaks in aged care facilities in NSW this year — 40 more than the total for 2016 — with more than 3000 elderly residents falling ill and 96 dying, although they all had a significant pre-existing illness.

“Vaccination is key to trying to head off some of this tsunami, Armageddon that hit this year, it’s time people all took note,” Mr Hazzard said.

Immunisation Coalition chair Paul Van Buynder said vaccination of aged care workers should be mandatory: “Flu vaccination varies between employers — the only thing that makes any difference is mandatory vaccination of workers.”

Registered nurse Madonna Jackson said staff were happy to get the shot.

“Staff are happy, the majority of the staff do take it up because it’s protecting not only their patients but their own family as well,” she said.