

Pharmacy travel vaccines pose Russian roulette risk

Holiday-makers could be dicing with death under proposals to allow pharmacists to deliver live travel vaccines, doctors have warned.

A Parliamentary committee recommended earlier this year that the role of pharmacists be expanded to include prescribing and dispensing some medications, including live travel vaccines.

Australian Medical Association (AMA) Queensland doctor and Australian Travel Medicine Alliance medical spokesperson Dr Deb Mills was “horrified and appalled” the proposal was being considered.

“This is not a trivial issue. Death or serious illness can be the result if a live vaccine is inadvertently given to someone who has a weakened immune system,” she warned.

Dr Mills said live vaccines were not the same as a tetanus or flu shot and had special risks that required a comprehensive overview of the patient’s medication and health status.

“It is a live product, which means it contains specially prepared organisms that can multiply in the person vaccinated,” she said.

“If that person has a compromised immune system – and they may not be aware if they do - the vaccine strain can run amok in the body and cause a great deal of damage, even death.”

Dr Mills said pharmacists were not trained to assess the health of a person’s overall immune system.

“Drugs people have taken in the past can place them at serious risk from live vaccines so it’s not a matter of assessing current medications and making a decision on the spot,” she said.

Live vaccines were given for prevention of chickenpox, measles, mumps and rubella, Japanese encephalitis, shingles, and yellow fever.

AMA Queensland Councillor and Director Dr Bav Manoharan said giving live travel vaccines was a bit like flying a plane.

“If it is smooth, normal weather, a beginner can do the job, but if birds hit the engine you need someone with extensive professional expertise to keep everyone safe and land the aircraft,” he said.

“The proposed shift of travel vaccine consultations also represents a lost opportunity for GPs to manage patients’ chronic conditions and perform crucial preventative health activities.”

AMA Queensland President Dr Dilip Dhupelia said the proposed legislation was premature and unsafe.

“I am sure that no pharmacist wants to be inadvertently responsible for causing serious illness or worse to patients,” he said.

“It is absolutely critical that live vaccines are managed by GPs or specialised travel vaccine providers who are extensively trained to assess the risk benefit of such a product.”

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