

**Australian Medical Association Limited**

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**Transcript:** AMA Vice President, Dr Chris Zappala, ABC Radio Sydney, *Drive with Josh Szeps*, Thursday, 6 June 2019

**Subject:** Flu season

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**JOSH SZEPS:** But first, have you had your flu shot yet? If not, you may be in a little bit of a pickle in the short term, because this year's virulent strain of the flu has depleted a lot of Sydney's stocks of the vaccine. It's becoming tricky to find at chemists.

Dr Chris Zappala is the Vice President of the Australian Medical Association. Chris, thanks for being here.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Good afternoon.

**JOSH SZEPS:** What's going on?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Look, we've had an unprecedented start to 2019, unfortunately, with four to five-fold the number of confirmed flu cases compared to previous years, and that's obviously put a bit of a strain on stocks. The Commonwealth National Immunisation Program supplies, which you can get through your general practitioner - the vaccine doesn't cost anything for those people who are eligible - there are still stocks of those vaccines available. The ones that we've run a little bit low of in the country, unfortunately, are the private sector stocks in the pharmacies, but more are hopefully on their way. So, if you want a vaccination, pop along to your GP and if you fit within that criteria, you'll be able to get it.

**JOSH SZEPS:** Right, so there's a special allocation for that class of people, is there?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Yeah, that's right. I mean, the Government tries, successive governments obviously try to make sure that there's enough available for all Australians and I don't think anyone could have predicted the huge unseasonal increase that we've had this year, particularly of Influenza A, and that's obviously been where the problem has come from.

But people who are over 65, if you've got problems with your immune system, if you've got chronic respiratory problems, if you've got no spleen, if you're of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent - those are the main groups - you can pop along to your general practitioner, and they should have stocks of the flu vaccine.

**JOSH SZEPS:** And just to clarify - is it that more people are getting vaccinated this year or is it that more people are getting the flu this year?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Look, it's both. There's no question that the rates of the flu this year so far are much higher than on previous years. And, as you may be aware, every so often this seems to happen for reasons that are not entirely clear, but it relates at least in part to the mutation of the virus. It's a very tricky virus, and it changes its appearance and it cloaks so that it can escape and slip through the immune system, and that's the problem.

And that's one of the reasons we have to have the flu vax every year, is because we're trying to stay a step ahead of the virus and its changing appearance, but that's very difficult to predict

and this year we've got this difficult strain of Influenza A which is making things a little bit more problematic for people. But we're definitely seeing more cases.

**JOSH SZEPS:** Yeah, and so basically the rule is, if you sometimes get the vaccine and sometimes you don't, you should get it this year because it's particularly virulent, and if you can't get it right now, if you're not part of the class of people who have a special allocation for it, if you're just in the general population, how long is the wait likely to be before some new vaccines can come through and those chemists' stores will be replenished again?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Yeah look, I don't know the exact answer to that, I'm afraid. But it shouldn't be too long - hopefully within days to a week or so. The other thing that I would just to reassure people, is that even if you get the vaccine, sometimes you can still get the flu after that, but if you're vaccinated, the severity of that episode is much less than if you hadn't been vaccinated.

**JOSH SZEPS:** Got it.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** So very important - we've all got to pop off and get our vaccine, and just make sure that these terrible viruses don't circulate round the community.

**JOSH SZEPS:** Good to talk to you, Chris. Thanks for being here.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Thanks, mate.

**JOSH SZEPS:** That's Dr Chris Zappala, the Vice President of the Australian Medical Association.

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6 June 2019

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