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PERTH GP WINS AMA AWARD FOR DEVELOPING REAL TIME VACCINE SAFETY MONITORING PROGRAM

AMA Excellence in Healthcare Award
2019 AMA NATIONAL CONFERENCE - #amanatcon
Sofitel Brisbane, 24-26 May 2019

A Perth GP who developed a surveillance program to actively monitor vaccine safety in real time is the recipient of the 2019 AMA Excellence in Healthcare Award.

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, announced Dr Alan Leeb as the winner at the AMA National Conference today.

“For more than three decades, Dr Alan Leeb has demonstrated his ongoing commitment to quality medical care and improving public health, particularly in the field of vaccination,” Dr Bartone said.

“Perhaps his most important achievement is developing the SmartVax tool, now used nationally, to deliver near real time, active adverse event information to general practices and hospital immunisation clinics, and to prospectively monitor the safety of all vaccines given in Australia.

“Dr Leeb was motivated by the events of April 2010, when the use of seasonal trivalent influenza vaccine in children was abruptly suspended following an unanticipated spike in febrile convulsions and other adverse events after the use of Fluvax.

“The suspension decreased public confidence in vaccinations and, more pointedly, caused a loss of confidence by some doctors in childhood influenza vaccination.

“Subsequently, there was a quick fall in the proportion of children fully vaccinated for influenza – from 45 per cent in 2009 to just 7 per cent in 2011.

“High immunisation rates are critical to protecting the nation’s health and, as we have seen overseas, any decrease in immunisation rates can lead to an increase in the incidence of vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles.

“Vaccinations and immunisation are key policy and medical issues, particularly at a time when a fringe group of highly dangerous anti-vaxxers is spreading false and potentially lethal misinformation.

“Dr Leeb was determined to never see another situation where the systems in place were unable to detect potential vaccine safety threats in a timely manner.

“Partnering with a software developer, Ian Peters, he developed SmartVax, a tool to actively monitor adverse events following immunisation (AEFI).

“SmartVax uses SMS and smartphone technology, and is a world leader in delivering active adverse event surveillance.

“The program has actively monitored almost two million vaccine antigens over 1.3 million immunisation encounters, and is in use at almost 300 practices and clinics across Australia.

“Dr Leeb’s significant contribution to developing and advancing vaccine safety surveillance in Australia has been recognised by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners with the Peter Mudge Prize for the research most likely to significantly influence daily general practice.

“His work through SmartVax and a subsequent program, SmartStartAllergy, has enabled health care providers to actively monitor and respond to adverse events following immunisation across all age groups, and allergic reactions to food in infants.

“Importantly, in an age where false and dangerous disinformation is being spread by unqualified individuals, the work of Dr Leeb and his partners has helped provide the evidence-based reassurance to the public and health professionals about the safety of vaccinations and the National Immunisation Program.

“Dr Alan Leeb is certainly a very worthy recipient of the 2019 AMA Excellence in Healthcare Award.”

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AMA EXCELLENCE IN HEALTHCARE FULL CITATION

DR ALAN LEEB MBBS

For over three decades, Dr Leeb has demonstrated his ongoing commitment to quality medical care and improving public health, particularly in the field of vaccinations.

Dr Leeb is responsible for developing the SmartVax program which actively monitors vaccine safety in real time.

In April 2010, the use of seasonal trivalent influenza vaccine in children was brusquely suspended following an unanticipated increase in febrile convulsions and other serious adverse events following administration of Fluvax® vaccine.

This decreased public confidence in vaccinations and, more pointedly, it caused a loss of confidence by some medical practitioners in childhood influenza vaccination.

Subsequently, in WA, there was a quick fall in the proportion of children fully vaccinated for influenza – the rate fell from a high of 45 per cent in 2009 to just 7 per cent in 2011.

For the AMA, vaccinations and immunisation are key policy and medical issues, especially as we are seeing a fringe group of highly dangerous anti-Vaxxers spreading false and potentially lethal misinformation.

The science is in and the evidence is clear – vaccination saves lives and improves public health around the world.

Vaccines stop preventable diseases. Parents need to be assured that routine infant and child immunisation is a proven, cost-effective public health measure that reduces the spread of vaccine-preventable disease.

Vaccinating children protects them and importantly also protects the wider community

High immunisation rates are critical to protecting the nation's health and, as we have seen overseas, any decrease in immunisation rates can lead to an increase in the incidence of vaccine preventable diseases, such as the current situation with Measles.

A major component in achieving high immunisation rates is having data to reassure health practitioners, governments and the community at large of the ongoing safety of our immunisation programs.

Prior to the events of 2010, Australia's system could be described as disjointed jurisdiction-based, with passive surveillance systems for monitoring adverse reactions to immunisation.

Dr Leeb was determined to never see another situation where the systems in place were unable to detect potential vaccine safety threats in a timely manner.

Dr Leeb started to develop a basic adverse event following immunisation surveillance system in 2011. Partnering with software developer, Ian Peters, they developed the SmartVax, a tool to actively monitor adverse events following immunisation (AEFI).

Briefly, the SmartVax program uses SMS and smartphone technology and can prospectively monitor the vaccine safety of all vaccines given in Australia in real-time.

From 2011 to 2014, this tool ran in Dr Leeb's own practice – the Illawarra Medical Centre - as a 'proof of concept'. With the support of Communicable Disease Control Directorate WA Health, SmartVax was developed and refined into a multisite tool.

The program has now been rolled out to GP practices, Aboriginal Medical Centres, as well as local government and major hospital immunisation clinics all across Australia, at no cost to the participating practice.

SmartVax is now a world leader in delivering near real time, active adverse event surveillance following immunisation and is now in use at almost 300 general practices and clinics across all states and territories of Australia.

The program has actively monitored almost two million vaccine antigens over 1.3 million immunisation encounters. Immunisation providers view SmartVax as an integral part of their duty of care to their patients.

Led by the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health, the national AusVaxSafety program was established in 2014 to monitor vaccine safety in Australia.

In 2015 AusVaxSafety partnered with SmartVax and SmartVax currently provides almost all (over 90 per cent) of the data used by AusVaxSafety to actively monitor seasonal influenza vaccine in all age groups, human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in adolescents aged 11-14 years and Pertussis booster vaccine in pregnant women.

The SmartVax team's ongoing commitment to health care continues with the recent development of another innovative medical advance, called SmartStartAllergy. SmartStartAllergy is an extension of the SmartVax program, developed by Dr Leeb and his SmartVax team in collaboration with the National Allergy Strategy.

Dr Leeb's significant contribution in developing and advancing vaccine safety surveillance in Australia through SmartVax has been recognised by the RACGP with the Peter Mudge Prize for the research most likely to significantly influence daily general practice.

Dr Leeb's work through SmartVax and SmartStartAllergy has made a substantial contribution to health care in Australia. His work has enabled health care providers to actively monitor and respond to adverse events following immunisation across all age groups and allergic reactions to food in infants.

Importantly, in an age where false and dangerous disinformation is being spread by unqualified individuals, the work of Dr Leeb and his partners has helped provide the evidence-based reassurance to the public and health professionals about the safety of vaccinations and Australia's National Immunisation Program.

The AMA is very pleased to announce that Dr Alan Leeb is the winner of the 2019 Excellence in Health Care Award.