Media release

"Trust and partnership" key to increased vaccination uptake

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Medical professionals, academics and policy experts agree that Federal and State Governments must fill the information vacuum surrounding Australia's COVID-19 vaccination program. Recent education efforts have been made more difficult by the misinformation and misinterpretation of old data that has filled the void created by the silence around vaccine supply issues, and inconsistent messaging between the Government and peak medical associations.

A recent Australian Ethical Health Alliance forum into the key issues surrounding the ethics of COVID-19 vaccination heard from key health, ethical and legal professionals who were unanimous in their solution to increasing the vaccination rate saying that greater transparency in decision making will build trust, while community outreach is a must.

Bill Bowtell, Adjunct Professor at UNSW, said "there needs to be a core partnership between Government, scientists and the at-risk communities. To encourage partnership there needs to be openness, honesty and transparency, which in turn will increase trust. Once trust is established the Government can enact radical and bold measures and implement frank education campaigns, similar to its outstanding response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic in the mid to early 80s.

"One of the things that is missing in Australia's response to-date is that the science behind decision-making needs to be disseminated. The scientific basis of political decisions being made cannot be delivered behind closed doors or in press releases by politicians. This just erodes trust," Mr Bowtell said.

Deakin University's Chair in Epidemiology, Professor Catherine Bennett said, "building trust and partnerships is difficult in an imperfect pandemic world, the challenge for Government's to date is getting the information together quickly enough to communicate to diverse community groups. Changed risk estimates that led to necessary changes in advice, such as recommended access to the AstraZeneca vaccine by age, undermined trust."

Forum moderator Dr Michelle Ananda-Rajah, disease specialist and general physician at Alfred Health, said "that while transparency of data and decision-making was vital there needed to be a change to the way information was being communicated as the risk of vaccine complications was referring to likelihood without taking impact into account, thereby further eroding trust."

Panellists Alison Choy Flannigan and Karl Rozenbergs from National law firm Hall & Wilcox said, that "mandatory legislation surrounding vaccination has been historically unpopular and most employers, without a Government direction, are unable to require employees to have a COVID-19 vaccine. However, employers could direct employees to get vaccinated if the direction is 'lawful and reasonable'. Fundamentally it is a workplace health and safety issue and in the case of organisations which provide services to the vulnerable, also a duty of care issue. Employers could strongly recommend employees to take the vaccine for health and safety reasons not only for themselves but for their colleagues and family."

Panellists were in agreement that while the procurement and supply of vaccines have been a problem, the Federal Government should educate the public about basic concepts, "such as the difference between immunisation, vaccination and inoculation," said Mr Bowtell

Lessons can be learnt from other countries who have achieved higher vaccination rates faster.

Moving forward Governments must work towards "social cohesion which is imperative if we are to build trust and partnership," added Ms Bennett.

Chair of the Australian Ethical Health Alliance, Adrian Cosenza said, "The expert commentary provided by the speakers must be considered by policy and decisions makers as we are in a critical junction in Australia's COVID-19 vaccine roll-out.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the Australian and global community, but it has reminded us of the importance of ethics, social solidarity and engagement in building public trust and promoting collective action for the benefit of all," added Mr Cosenza.

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About the Australian Ethical Health Alliance
AEHA represents 75 member organisations including industry, government, education, healthcare professionals, hospitals and patient groups, who share a commitment to ethical practice and collaboration.

An Australian delegation launched the ACF initiative at the APEC Business Ethics for SME Forum, in Tokyo, on 20 July 2018. AEHA was formed in April 2019 as the leading body to guide the implementation of the ACF. Membership consists of those member organisations who are signatories to the ACF.

The initiative is sector-lead and participation is voluntary. The federal and state and territory jurisdictions strongly endorse the initiative.

More information is available at: www.ethicalhealth.org.au