



## **The Hon. Greg Hunt MP**

Minister for Health

# **TRANSCRIPT**

21 April 2020

### **INTERVIEW WITH FRAN KELLY ABC RADIO NATIONAL**

*E&OE...*

*Topics: Vaccine Rollout update*

**FRAN KELLY:**

Well, the Herculean challenge of protecting the country against COVID-19 enters a new phase today with the rollout of mass vaccination hubs in Melbourne.

At the national level, though, local GP clinics will remain the backbone of the strategy, with work already underway on how to step up the rollout when the immunisation of people over 50 is given the green light at tomorrow's national cabinet meeting.

But problems persist with the vaccination of vulnerable groups. Just 6.5 per cent of disability care residents have been inoculated so far, with complaints of high numbers of aged care workers too are yet to receive their doses.

Greg Hunt is the Health Minister. Minister, welcome back to *Breakfast*.

**GREG HUNT:**

Good morning, Fran.

**FRAN KELLY:**

I want to come to the broader rollout in a moment, but first to the half a million people in the disability and aged care sectors that were supposed to be vaccinated by Easter. Obviously, they haven't.

Given they are our most vulnerable, what does that say about how strategy's going so far and when will they be protected?

**GREG HUNT:**

Well, firstly, in terms of people in 1A and 1B, the high priority groups, that work is proceeding.

We've so far vaccinated over 1.7 million people within that group. And that number has increased six-fold in the last four weeks with the opening up of the GPs.

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Somerville, Victoria.

In relation to disability and aged care, in aged care, it's over 177,000 people as of the figures from 24 hours ago – we'll get today's figures later on during the morning.

And then in terms of disability, we move into the next phase next week with the commencement of an expanded in-reach programs.

So we were always going to do this in stages based on the highest risk where our elderly aged care residents, sadly, as we know, 685 of the 910 people who were lost to COVID, who passed to COVID last year were in aged care homes. 655 of them just in one state in Victoria.

So that's been the highest of the priorities. And now we move on to in-reach next week in the disability, and that follows the order and priority which was always intended.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Okay, we've got a picture though yesterday from the evidence before the Parliament's COVID committee of how slowly things are going for some of these sectors. We learnt that just 93 group disability homes have received their first injections. That's about 1500 of the 25,000 residents.

Labour hire firm ONCALL, which employs 1500 staff in disability homes, says not one of their employees has been vaccinated. Not one. People with disability feeling like they're the forgotten people in this rollout.

**GREG HUNT:**

No, they're a very important part of it, and there are a number of ways for people with disability and staff to be vaccinated. Firstly, through the general program, for those that are homebound. And of course, that's a very important part of the group with disability in homes who are not able for various reasons to travel. It will come to them.

And that's what we begin on a significant scale, ramping up from next week with the in-reach program as was intended. So this is always about working in stages as we move right through the country.

And I think it is very important to stop and pause and say two things are occurring. In a world with 700,000 plus cases a day, zero community cases in Australia again yesterday for the 65th day this year. And secondly, a progressive rollout that works through the different areas and where people can move.

Obviously they can be given the access through the general practice or the GP respiratory clinics to AstraZeneca. And as you mentioned, in Victoria as of today, all of the phase 1A and 1B have access to three large vaccination clinics that the Victorian government's operating.

But secondly, because of the change in medical advice, that means that there's a different distribution mechanism into the disability homes with regards to the Pfizer vaccine to make sure that we have a highly qualified, highly capable, highly mobile teams which are commencing in the next stage as of next week.

So that's what was intended, and legitimate questions. But hopefully that provides sort of certainty, plan, comfort and support.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Yeah, because I think certainty and comfort is what's missing. I mean, Caroline Edwards, associate secretary in your department, told the COVID parliamentary committee that the initial slow start in

aged care residents required us to pivot to make sure we focused on them. That's why the pivot was away from the disability homes.

But even with that.

**GREG HUNT:**

I wouldn't say it was a pivot away.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Well I'm using her quote, that's not my word.

**GREG HUNT:**

An initial focus on the most vulnerable population, which we know was where the tragedies did occur, even though we've been fortunately spared by the rest of the world, every one of those lives lost is an agony.

And then now we've moved appropriately to focus on outreach, those that can travel, if they're able to visit the general practice or the state clinics, or those that are homebound, we'll come to them. And that process begins in earnest next week.

**FRAN KELLY:**

All right. But even with that emphasis on the aged care that Caroline Edward said was in place, the United Workers Union has surveyed its members and found that 85 per cent hadn't received the first shots.

Aren't aged care workers the most likely source of transmission into a nursing- I mean, isn't that a priority into a nursing home?

**GREG HUNT:**

They're all part of phase 1A and phase 1B.

**FRAN KELLY:**

85 per cent haven't received their vaccination.

**GREG HUNT:**

We have to start somewhere and finish somewhere. 36,000 aged care workers is the latest update that I have.

And that program, again, with the opening of the GP rollout, with the in-reach that will be provided for aged care workers, and also the honest thing that we've had to do, which was to change medical advice from ATAGI. Global challenge that we face as the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, the global challenge has been that the AstraZeneca is preferred to the 50 and over, the Pfizer for the under 50. That's changed.

And we've adapted as we've done the whole way through the pandemic. And when you look at zero cases in Australia versus 700,000 a day around the world, and then the fact that we're now at 1.7 million from within that priority group, I think that shows the safety in Australia and the progress.

And now those two groups are the next part, having focussed on the key transmission in quarantine, border and frontline hospital workers, that's where it could escape from those that have come from overseas, so that program's worked well in the key transmission, and the key vulnerability risk was those in aged care homes.

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Somerville, Victoria.

And now we move to the next part in terms of the workers, already 36,000 done. And then secondly, at the same time, to the disability care residents.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Okay. So, slow and steady is your message and certainly, we are fortunate in this country that we do not have the community transmission, the horrible numbers that other countries do.

**GREG HUNT:**

I wouldn't say slow and steady. I'd say as quickly as we can, commensurate with safety and focusing on the key transmission risk, being the borders and the frontline hospital workers who were dealing in the hot zones or the red zones with patients and then the elderly.

Now, we're in that strong position, having vaccinated 177,000, plus of our aged care residents to be able to use those same resources to assist our disability residents. That's our priority.

**FRAN KELLY:**

There have been frustrations over the rollout and the orderliness of it and the certainty of it and the supply. National Cabinet has now agreed to- in principal, to bring forward vaccinating people over 50s. But, all up, there's an estimated 6.8 million people in the first two groups, 1A and 1B, before we go to the over 50s.

As of yesterday, as you've told us, 1.7 million injections. Are we too far behind at the moment with these groups to start bringing forward the over 50s yet? Do we have enough supplies and means of dispensing to run in parallel, to get- just to open it up?

**GREG HUNT:**

So, what this would do, and again, it's subject to a National Cabinet decision is it would draw on that network of now, over 4500 primary care outlets. So, the majority of those are GPs, over 4300 practices which have continued to grow in number.

Secondly, there are the GP respiratory clinics or the Commonwealth vaccination clinics, over 100 of those and similarly, over 100 Indigenous or Aboriginal community controlled health organisations. So, the outlets are there and the advice that I had only yesterday, I haven't had an opportunity to talk publicly about this yet is that there was strong support from within the general practice community - the AMA, the College of GPs, the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine, and the Rural Doctors Association of Australia - for bringing forward the over 50s category.

They will make sure that the priority remains the over 70s or others within phase 1A and B. But it's clear that there is sufficient supply of AstraZeneca to do this, so long as we do it carefully.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Minister I'm sorry to interrupt you there, but we're going to run out of time and I don't think it is clear to people that there is sufficient supply.

I mean, I have people writing in every single day telling me they can't- their GP can't get them a vaccination for six weeks because they don't have the numbers.

Someone's just written it in; I'm in 1B, I'm unable to get an appointment. We had in the North Medical Clinic in Melbourne tell us that it's capable of dispensing 2000 doses a week, but it's supplied with just 50.

I mean, I think it's clear that for many of these GP clinics, they might be willing, but they don't have the doses or the capacity yet to serve people. I mean, I'm hearing it time and time and time again.

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Somerville, Victoria.

**GREG HUNT:**

So, what we're seeing is that we're distributing large volumes. They were done on the basis of initial applications and with 4500 outlets and you have a very significant number of opportunities and points of presence around the country.

Some practices are dispensing to their full capacity and we've asked them now.

**FRAN KELLY:**

But, some are only getting 50 doses a week?

**GREG HUNT:**

Correct.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Well, that's not full capacity is it?

**GREG HUNT:**

Within the doses that they've been provided. We've asked practices to provide information as to whether or not they believe they could do more and when.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Well, are you getting the feedback we're getting? That GPs are frustrated and that their patients are frustrated?

**GREG HUNT:**

Well, what we're seeing is, as I say, 1.7 million doses delivered. If you have 4500 points of presence, some will be delivering to their full capacity. Some will be finding that they have spare capacity.

And so the discussion with the AMA and the College of GPs is that- is very clear that the vast majority of practices are in very strong position. Some would like more and that's something which we're now considering.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Okay

**GREG HUNT:**

That's a position which allows us to bring forward potentially subject to the views of National Cabinet. But I'm able to advise National Cabinet that the medical groups are supportive of bringing forward the over 50s from the mid-year timeframe, to an earlier time frame in the coming weeks and I think that's very important.

At the same time, the first of the large vaccination clinics, three of them beginning in Victoria today, for all of the 1A and 1B population who would be seeking the AstraZeneca vaccine. All of these things are coming together and so, we'll get everybody done and we'll make sure that we continue to keep Australia safe.

And as we do that, to be able to vaccinate the nation, we do that in a progressive fashion, as quickly as we can within the supplies available. But being able to bring forward potentially subject to National Cabinet 50 over 50 is I think an important step in confidence.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Minister, we're almost out of time. Just a couple of questions.

Someone's just written in saying: we are general practice on the Gold Coast, we've got 1200 doses sitting in our facility desperately waiting for customers. This brings us to the mystery really surrounding the numbers, because we're told that CSL is producing about 800,000 doses a week.

As you've said, only 1.7 million have been dispensed. Some of the Pfizer are held back for second shots, we know that. But, there's an estimate around the missing doses of 2.7 million.

Do you know where they all are and why aren't these in people's arms?

**GREG HUNT:**

That's a false statement. So, the answer on that I think is very simple, that we've administered 1.7 million and that was out of the 2.4 million that was available for those weeks.

For this week, another 600,000 has been made available. And then for next week, there's another 600,000 that is in process of being distributed and then we have contingency, which makes up the balance.

Contingency is to make sure that we have the doses available for second shots, which is obviously something that's a fundamental task.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Okay.

**GREG HUNT:**

So, that's actually very easily explained. But the critical thing here is because we have this sovereign domestic capability that very few countries have, we're able to continue to the supply. We've seen global supply challenges.

Europe, of course, I think it's well documented the challenges that they've had and they're in the midst of the grip of the pandemic. We don't have the pandemic within Australia, but we are subject to the risks of the global pandemic and at the same time, rolling out those vaccines and each day more and more people and that's more and more protection for Australia.

**FRAN KELLY:**

Just one final question, briefly, if you could, about the cost of it. We know the cost per injection that the Commonwealth pays the GP's is around \$30. Is the cost that the Commonwealth will pay the states for their rollout? Is it to be higher or lower than that?

**GREG HUNT:**

So we pay the states and the GPs, the same amount that GPs also have, what's called practice incentive payments, if they complete both services for the same person in the same practice. But, the rate is the same across the states and the GPs.

**FRAN KELLY**

Minister, thank you very much for your time.

**GREG HUNT:**

Thanks very much, Fran.

**-ENDS-**

Authorised by Greg Hunt MP, Liberal Party of Australia, Somerville, Victoria.