

Friday 4 June 2021

Vaccinations Surge across Gannawarra

The administration of COVID-19 vaccines across the Gannawarra Shire has surged in the last week after initially starting in March. Both Northern District Community Health (NDCH) Cohuna District Hospital (CDH) and Kerang District Health (KDH) worked with Bendigo Health to provide phase 1a and 1b vaccinations in April and May, and again last week, to NDCH and KDH staff and other people under stage 1b of the national vaccine roll out. This included both AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines to community health and health care staff and doctors, emergency services staff and eligible volunteers, private aged care providers and frontline staff.

Ochre Medical Centre Cohuna started giving COVID-19 vaccines to people over 50 in late March. "Since we started on 23rd March, we have continued to give approximately 100 vaccinations a week," Practice Manager Leanne Dickinson said. "Nine weeks later and we're closing in on 1,000 vaccinations across the region."

The first Kerang COVID-19 Vaccination Clinic, which took place on Thursday 3rd June gave vaccinations to more than 90 people. The clinic, a partnership between Kerang District Health (KDH) and NDCH under the vaccination program facilitated by Swan Hill District Health and the Bendigo Health Public Health Unit, is planning on expanding. "The demand for the vaccination clinic has been incredible," KDH CEO Robert Jarman said. "The dedicated vaccine phone line has been ringing since it was first opened. Upcoming clinics are booking out and we are looking at how we might be able to expand the vaccination clinics and make them available to even more people."

NDCH CEO Mandy Hutchinson said the three days of vaccinations NDCH provided with the Bendigo Health Public Health Unit just last week totalled over 300 people. "The most recent outbreaks in Victoria and the confirmed exposure in Cohuna at the football and netball really brought it home for a lot of people," Ms. Hutchinson said. "People have become more motivated to get vaccinated, which is a good outcome from what was a scary incident. Local and regional health services are working together in unprecedented ways to make sure the vaccines are available to everyone who wants them. NDCH will also be working with vulnerable community groups to make sure they have access to accurate information to help make their own choice about getting vaccinated."

Bendigo Health CEO, Peter Faulkner said the dedicated work of health services to get vaccinations out in local areas is timely given the ever-changing nature of the COVID-19 virus. "The advice coming from the Department of Health and the Chief Health Officer is that as the virus mutates it is becoming more infectious." Mr. Faulkner said.

A statement from Victoria's Acting Premier James Merlino on Tuesday said the virus is quicker and more contagious than before. "To date, the approach has been to track the spread through friends, family and workmates," Mr. Merlino said. "People spending time together for minutes and hours – not seconds." However, at least one in ten current cases have caught the virus from a stranger, including someone they've brushed against in a small shop or while getting a take-away coffee from the same cafe.

Health services are trying to meet demand for vaccinations while also ensuring both staff and communities are protected. "We have to protect the staff giving vaccines and people receiving them," Mr. Jarman said. "Every check and balance is being completed. And we cannot afford to burn out our



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workforce because then there'll be no one to give the injections. We also have to make sure our health workers are able to keep doing their work on hospital wards, in community health and residential aged care. Thankfully, we all have staff who step up and ask what we need them to do."

"We encourage everyone to be patient and kind," Ms. Hutchinson said. "We completely understand there's a level of anxiety about access to COVID-19 vaccinations. Every day, the management of all of our local health services are in consultation with regional health services and government departments to make sure rural people have access to health services locally, including vaccination programs. We've been doing that for years and we'll keep doing it. We will get through this together."

The public messaging remains that people who feel unwell should get tested and isolate themselves until they get a negative test result back. Anyone who is unwell should not attend a vaccination centre. People should continue with social distancing and hand hygiene, as well as facemasks where required. People should also get vaccinated.

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