THE death of another baby in Australia’s slow-moving whooping cough epidemic underscores the importance of broad immunisation coverage, an expert says.

The five-week-old boy died in the intensive care ward of an Adelaide hospital earlier this week.

Professor Peter McIntyre said this was the fourth child death in a pertussis outbreak which started in 2008.

The infant contracted the bacterial lung infection when he was too young to receive the whooping cough vaccine, which can be administered after a child is six weeks old.

“Babies too young to be immunised can only be protected by the highest possible levels of protection among those in contact with them,” Professor McIntyre, who is director of the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance at The Children’s Hospital at Westmead in Sydney, said.

He said it was particularly important to ensure they were safe from infection via family members, for whom vaccine is available and in many states free.

Australia recorded a surge in whooping cough cases mostly on the eastern seaboard in 2008-09 and Professor McIntyre said the wave of infection was now arriving “later in many other parts of Australia”.

While a tragedy for all families involved, he said the ongoing epidemic was not of the scope of a national whooping cough outbreak in 1996-97, when nine children died.

“Although any child death is a tragedy, we have half the number of pertussis deaths in the most recent epidemic despite an increase in the child population, and in the ability to detect and diagnose pertussis as the cause,” Professor McIntyre said.

Professor McIntyre said recent improvements in the test for whooping cough had led to more cases being formally diagnosed and so the caseload could be “under-recognised” before this decade.

He said work was under way to test the efficacy of giving the whooping cough vaccine to children at birth, to close the window of vulnerability.

“The other important issue is to ensure that, during a pertussis epidemic, there is a high level of awareness amongst doctors of whooping cough as a diagnostic possibility among infants too young to be immunised,” Professor McIntyre said.

“On the part of parents, there needs to be an awareness of the importance of keeping their young babies away from individuals with cough or other respiratory symptoms.”