Kids miss out on vaccine

GPs reminded to offer second dose of varicella vax

BY SARAH COLYER

A LEADING paediatrician is concerned GPs are not routinely recommending two doses of varicella vaccine to children because they wrongly believe “if it were important it would be funded”.

Dr Jenny Royle, a paediatrician with the immunisation service at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne, raised the issue at the 12th National Immunisation Conference in Adelaide last week, suggesting breakthrough varicella was a significant public health problem.

The National Immunisation Program funds one dose of varicella vaccine at 18 months, but the Australian Immunisation Handbook 9th Edition states that based on current evidence, two doses in children from 12 months of age will minimise the risk of breakthrough varicella.

The handbook also states that the minimum approved interval between doses of varicella vaccine is four weeks.

But Dr Royle said she suspected the option was not being presented to most Australian parents, even though it was evidence-based and best-practice.

“If something is not funded, it can imply that is not important, and I think this is an example of that,” she told Australian Doctor.

She suggested giving a dose of varicella vaccine at either 12 months or 13 months, followed by the scheduled 18-month dose.

Breakthrough varicella infection was less severe than the disease in unvaccinated children, but it was still highly contagious and posed a risk to the vulnerable and the unvaccinated, she said. A case of breakthrough varicella could also damage parents’ confidence in vaccines, she added.

Associate Professor Peter Richmond, deputy chair of Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation agreed that “in the past, health professionals and the public have perceived that if a vaccine is not on the National Immunisation Program, it is not worthwhile”.

However, he said there was now much greater awareness of the need for vaccines to be cost-effective in order to be funded. He suggested giving a dose of varicella vaccine at either 12 months or 13 months, followed by the scheduled 18-month dose.

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Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne
Two doses of varicella vax
Two doses of varicella vaccine would be unlikely to be included on the immunisation schedule in future, as breakthrough infection was not usually severe.

Associate Professor Robert Booy, head of the clinical research team at the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, said GPs should discuss with their patients the option of giving children an additional dose. “A second dose will improve the community protection,” he said.

For more on the 12th National Immunisation Conference, see page 3.