Whooping cough secret

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HEALTH authorities refuse to reveal how many of the state's health workers have current whooping cough vaccinations, but an Adelaide expert believes it may be as few as 40 per cent.

Dr Rod Pearce, a member of the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, said interstate research had found about 35 per cent of doctors and 45 per cent of nurses kept their vaccinations up-to-date.

"There's an anomaly that the health workers don't seem to want to be vaccinated," he said.

"To me, it's as critical as washing your hands."

His comments follow two cases last week of patients coming into contact with hospital staff with whooping cough. SA has recorded 4066 cases to the end of September, which included the death of a five-week-old boy.

SA Health guidelines require hospitals to know the vaccination status of their staff, to provide a vaccination service and to carefully consider where to place staff who decline vaccination.

Dr Pearce said it was his "impression" hospitals were not adhering to the guidelines.

SA Health Chief executive Dr Tony Sherbon has ordered a review of immunisation guidelines after finding out about "arrangements in place at various sites".

He would not explain what this meant.

He also refused to reveal the percentage of health workers whose whooping cough vaccinations were not current but said it would be "small". He said the vaccine only works in 70 per cent of cases.

However, the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance says a study published last year shows that five years after being administered, a booster shot remains effective in 85 per cent of adults. Australian Medical Association state president Dr Andrew Lavender said it was most unlikely the number of unvaccinated staff was small.

Last year, more than 40 per cent of health workers did not get an influenza immunisation.

Dr Lavender admitted he was overdue for a whooping cough booster and believed he may have had the disease this year.

"The medical community isn't attentive enough and certainly the Government isn't as well," he said.