

2019

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**RESPONSE TO ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION OF 18 SEPTEMBER 2019 AND SELECT
COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2019-20 RECOMMENDATION 80 –
UPDATE ON THE 2019 ACT INFLUENZA SEASON**

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Minister for Health**

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Influenza is the most common vaccine-preventable disease in Australia. Although usually a mild disease, it can cause very serious illness in high-risk population groups such as the elderly and immunocompromised people and sometimes even in otherwise healthy people. While influenza can occur at any time during the year, notifications of influenza in the ACT usually increase in mid to late July, with the peak of the flu season typically occurring during August and September.

However, the influenza virus changes from one year to the next and so does its impact on public health. Some strains of influenza can affect different groups of the population more than others. Other contributing factors include the general susceptibility of the population to the circulating strains and the match of the influenza vaccine to those strains.

In preparation for the 2019 influenza season, the annual ACT Health Sector Winter Action Plan was developed by agencies across the health sector to manage the anticipated upsurge of presentations from seasonal influenza cases. This annual body of work improves coordination and consistency of response during the influenza season and is complemented by Winter Management Plans developed by both Canberra Health Services and Calvary Public Hospital.

The Canberra Health Services Winter Bed Management Strategy formally commenced on 11 July 2019 to manage the surge in demand associated with increased incidence of influenza disease in the community. This aligned to the completion of critical infrastructure works across the campus. However, strategies to support increased seasonal demand, including improved discharge planning, additional recruitment and increasing access to pathology rapid testing were implemented prior to this date.

Additional capacity of the hospital system was realised by the opening of 12 additional beds at University of Canberra Hospital from June 2019. A targeted external communication strategy also commenced in June to promote the use of Walk in Centres, as well as to educate the community about the difference between a cold and influenza.

A weekly influenza planning meeting was also established during the height of the season. Chaired by the Chief Health Officer, these meetings provided an opportunity to regularly share information between the ACT Health Directorate, Canberra Health Services, Calvary Hospital and Capital Health Network.

Promoting influenza vaccination amongst the community was a key priority in 2019, because vaccination is the most effective way of reducing the risk of contracting influenza. The ACT Health Directorate developed an 'Influenza and winter wellbeing communication strategy' that focused on encouraging people in the ACT community to get the influenza vaccine early and actions to limit the spread of the disease.

In addition to vaccine promotion, the ACT Health Directorate undertook other activities during 2019 to prepare the community for winter, including running education sessions with aged care and primary care providers prior to the flu season and distribution of information and tips to the community on how to keep themselves and their families well during the cooler months.

While influenza vaccination is recommended for everyone aged six months and over, the National Immunisation Program provides free influenza vaccine to people at higher risk of complications from the flu, including: those with certain medical risk factors; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; those aged 65 and older; and pregnant women.

To complement the National Immunisation Program Schedule, in 2018, the ACT Government introduced free influenza vaccine for all children aged from six months to under five years. This was a hugely successful program and continued into 2019.

In 2019, two pilot initiatives were also trialled providing greater access to people aged 65 and older to government funded flu vaccine. One pilot was in 43 community pharmacies and the second in Walk-in Centres. These initiatives provided alternative options to general practice for older people to access the free vaccine.

The ACT Health Directorate is responsible for the delivery of government funded influenza vaccines to over 200 immunisation providers. The initial distribution of influenza vaccines to GPs and early childhood immunisation clinics was completed in a timely fashion by 12 April 2019, and initial distribution to pharmacies and Walk-in Centres was completed the following week.

The 2019 flu season in the ACT commenced earlier and lasted longer than any flu season in the preceding 10 years. Influenza notifications began increasing in early May, which was approximately nine weeks earlier than the average start to the previous five seasons. However, in some ways, the 2019 season mirrored the highly publicised 2017 season, which saw the highest levels of influenza activity since the 2009 influenza pandemic.

Between 1 January and 6 October 2019, there were a total of 3,910 cases of influenza notified to the Health Directorate, surpassing the total number for 2017; noting that the 2019 season began much earlier and lasted much longer than previous seasons. There was also higher influenza activity at the beginning of 2019, prior to the start of the season, which has added to the higher overall numbers for 2019.

It is notable that while the number of influenza cases reported to ACT Health Directorate was very high during 2019, the clinical severity for the season, as measured by the number of patients hospitalised, the proportion of intensive care unit admissions, and the number of influenza-associated deaths, was comparable to or lower than previous seasons. This is a good outcome.

The uniqueness of the 2019 season and the fact that the influenza season varies each year makes measuring the effectiveness of the Government's preparatory activities challenging. Additionally, increasing awareness of influenza amongst the community and increased laboratory diagnostic testing over recent years has led to a corresponding higher number of notifications.

It is also noteworthy that in 2019, the Health Directorate delivered an unprecedented 110,952 vaccines. Ninety-five percent of these vaccines were delivered between April and June 2019, which indicates that the community is hearing the message on the importance of getting vaccinated.

An evaluation of the Pharmacy Vaccine Pilot for 65 years and over is still underway but initial findings indicate that more than 1,900 vaccines were administered to eligible people under the pilot program.

An evaluation of the Influenza and Winter Wellbeing Communication Strategy 2019 found that the cumulative reach of the campaign was over 400,000 people, with a high level of engagement through social media activities.

As of mid-October 2019, influenza notifications have returned to background inter-seasonal levels, indicating that the 2019 influenza season is over. As this current flu season has come to an end, the ACT Health Directorate is already looking to preparations for 2020.

The ACT's clinical and directorate staff should be acknowledged for their work in the lead up to this highly volatile season. Their work has contributed tremendously to ensuring health services were able to manage an unpredictable flu season to the best of their ability.

Thanks should also be extended to stakeholders across the primary health care sector, in pharmacies and general practices, with whom ACT health services work closely every year to support our community, particularly those more vulnerable.



ACT Influenza Surveillance Report – No. 21, 2019

Summary: Influenza notifications have continued to decrease in week 40 and have almost returned to background levels.

Influenza notifications

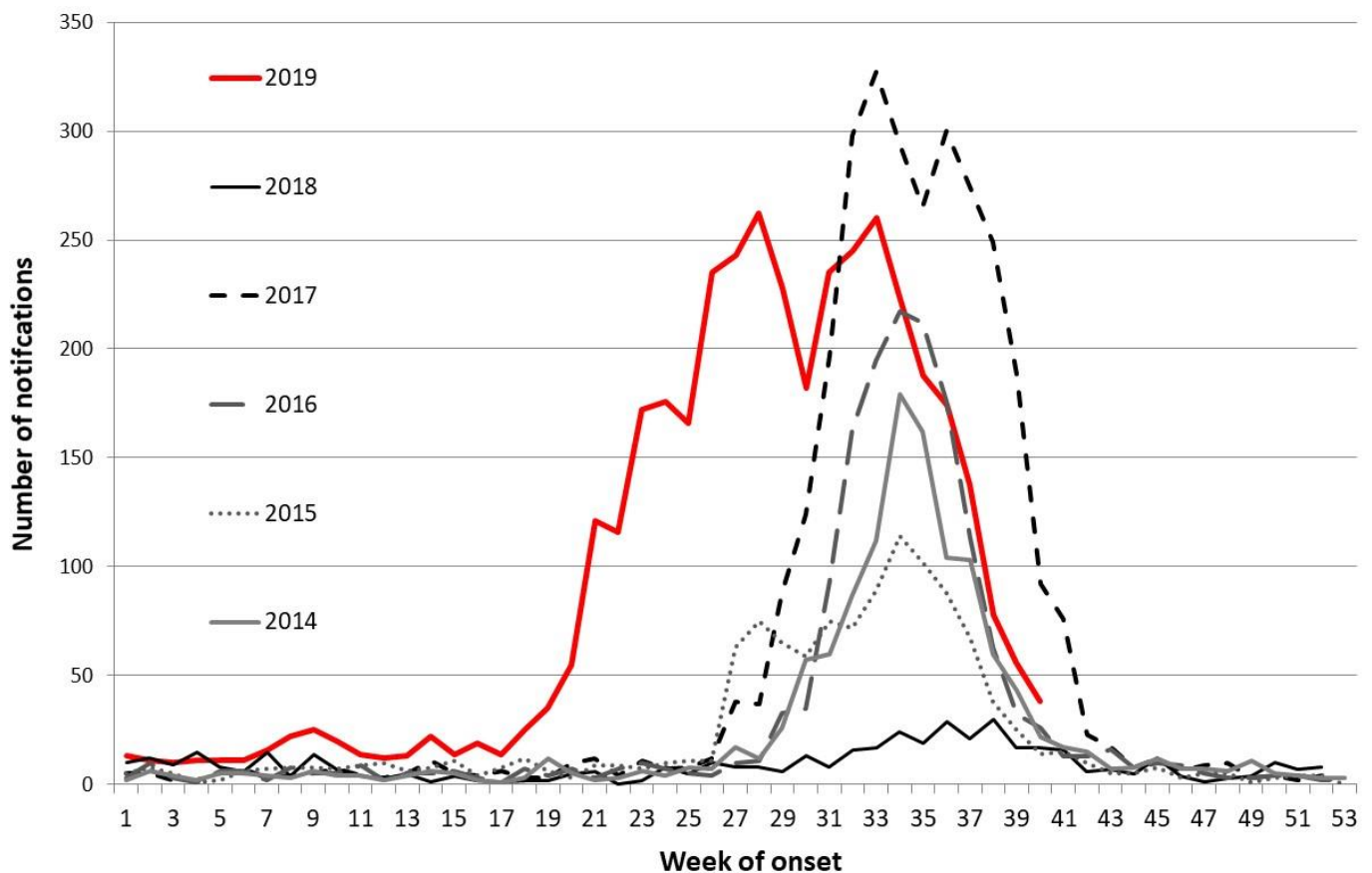
Reporting Period: 1 January to 6 October 2019, Weeks 1-40

Influenza notifications have continued to decrease in the last week (Figure). Between 1 January and 6 October 2019, there were 3,910 notifications of influenza reported to ACT Health, with only 38 (1%) of these notifications occurring in the last week (Figure). Notifications in 2019 have surpassed the total number for 2017, noting that the 2019 influenza season began much earlier compared to previous seasons. In 2017, there were a total of 3,098 influenza notifications reported, and activity peaked at 327 notifications in one week (reporting week 33).

Year to date, 76% (n=2,961) of notifications were influenza A and 23% (n=905) were influenza B. There have been 44 notifications (1%) of cases co-infected with influenza A and B. Of the 365 (12%) influenza A notifications with subtype information available, 117 (32%) were A/H1 and 248 (68%) were A/H3.

In 2019, notification numbers overall have been highest among adults aged 20-64 years (49%, n=1,918), with only 12% (n=466) of notifications among children aged 0-4 years and 15% (n=580) among adults 65 years and over.

Figure. Number of influenza notifications, by week and year of onset, 1 January 2014 to 6 October 2019*, ACT.



**Data provided for the current and most recent weeks may be incomplete. All data are preliminary and subject to change as updates are received. Notification data include all cases of influenza diagnosed by a laboratory among residents of the ACT. Generally, notified cases represent only a small proportion of cases of influenza occurring in the community.*

Notification data were exported on 8 October 2019 for the period 1 January 2014 to 6 October 2019, by onset date.

Source: Notifiable Diseases Database, ACT, Communicable Disease Control Section, ACT Health.