

Hepatitis B and Vaccination

Hepatitis Australia Statement – August 25 2008

According to news reports (Sydney Morning Herald, August 23), the NSW Department of Community Services has taken out a Supreme Court Order to force a NSW couple to vaccinate their child against hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B affects an estimated 350 million people worldwide and an estimated 160,000 people in Australia. The hepatitis B virus is found in blood and body fluids such as saliva, semen, vaginal secretions and breast milk, with the most common modes of transmission including mother to child transmission, sexual contact and sharing of injecting equipment.

The Hepatitis B vaccine has been available for some years and has passed the stringent quality control requirements applied to all vaccines available in Australia. Childhood immunisation is the single most effective public health measure to reduce life threatening complications from chronic hepatitis B infection.

In Australia hepatitis B vaccination is not compulsory for infants. Decisions about whether to vaccinate or not are an individual choice and need to weigh up the benefits and risks as an individual. There is a lot of misinformation around potential adverse reactions to vaccinations on the web. People need to consider the veracity of the source of information and also look at placebo-controlled studies which indicate severe reactions to immunisations are very rare.

Hepatitis Australia fully endorses hepatitis B immunisation as the single most effective public health measure to reduce transmission of hepatitis B. We believe adults should always be free to make their own informed decision and parents making vaccination decisions for their infants should be supported by accurate and accessible information.

Education about hepatitis B through provision of accurate information is the most effective way of reducing incidence of hepatitis B in Australia.