

RESPIRATORY SYNCYTIAL VIRUS IMMUNISATION PROGRAM

114. Mr T.J. HEALY to the Minister for Health:

I refer to the Cook Labor government's record of putting the health of Western Australians first.

- (1) Can the minister outline to the house how this government's delivery of an Australian-first free respiratory syncytial virus—RSV—immunisation program will protect our youngest, most vulnerable Western Australians this winter?
- (2) Can the minister advise the house how this program will relieve pressure on our hospitals?

Ms A. SANDERSON replied:

- (1) I thank the member for the question. The Premier and I, as many would have seen, last week joined both Katherine and her gorgeous daughter, Hazel, at the Rheola Street Central Immunisation Clinic. At only two months old, Hazel spent eight days in an induced coma at Perth Children's Hospital suffering from RSV. Instead of enjoying those first early, precious months, the time was wracked with worry, concern and stress about whether her daughter was going to survive. Katherine said —

This was the first time I'd heard of RSV and remember thinking: Why didn't someone tell me about this before?

I now know it's a common virus. Many kids have a mild case, but for Hazel, RSV meant an induced coma, collapsed lung, blood transfusion, medication withdrawals and countless, invasive blood tests.

That is why the Western Australian Cook Labor government made the decision to fund for the Western Australian community free access to RSV vaccinations for the most vulnerable members of our community—babies. This is a nation first; we are the first state to do this. It has had fantastic success in the northern hemisphere in the winter period by significantly reducing visits to GPs, emergency departments and hospitals. Respiratory syncytial virus—RSV—is highly infectious. It affects more than 65 per cent of babies in their first year of life, and four out of five babies and children with RSV who require hospitalisation have zero underlying conditions; they are completely healthy children. It can literally affect anyone.

- (2) This will have a significant impact on our system over this winter. With flu, COVID and RSV vaccinations, we expect and hope to see fewer hospitalisations of children with RSV in Perth Children's Hospital. It is literally full of babies with RSV in winter. It is very complex. It creates enormous strain on staff, the emergency department and other people seeking access to care. From April, babies under eight months old will be eligible for RSV vaccinations from general practitioner practices, community health clinics and Aboriginal services. From May, we will be rolling out the vaccinations at birthing hospitals so the immunisation will be available as soon as babies are born to give those babies careful protection. We know that many people do not take their babies out, particularly if they are born in the winter months, before their important eight-week vaccinations. This will give them an extra layer of confidence. Babies between eight and 19 months who are at increased risk of severe RSV will also be eligible. When people are taking their kids to their GP for their older flu vaccination, they should also ask about the RSV vaccine for babies.

The Australian Medical Association in Queensland is lobbying the Queensland government to implement a similar program. We believe, under the current evidence we have, that we can prevent 700 RSV-related hospitalisations this year alone. We can also prevent 2 000 emergency department presentations and over 4 000 GP appointments can be saved if people use this immunisation. I am very proud that we are the first government in Australia to be able to provide this for the community and an added layer of assurance, protection and care for the most vulnerable people in our community.