



Experts call for rotavirus vaccine for all

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Oral rotavirus vaccines to prevent severe gastroenteritis should now be made available to all Australian children, senior paediatricians say in the latest issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

“There is real excitement at suddenly having such an effective tool to prevent a common, miserable disease affecting infants and children,” Professors Graeme Barnes and Ruth Bishop say in an editorial.

“Rotavirus vaccine is not only justified on the basis of disease burden, but will be welcomed by all who care for sick children.

“There is no reason to wait any longer for a national program. The improvement in child health will be obvious.”

The authors – both Senior Principal Research Fellows at the Melbourne-based Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and Professorial Fellows at the University of Melbourne’s Department of Paediatrics – acknowledge the Northern Territory Government’s recent commitment to provide the vaccine for all babies.

But they say that, ideally, all children in Australia under three months of age should be given the vaccine.

“All will eventually be exposed to rotavirus, and one in 25 will be admitted to hospital for rotavirus gastroenteritis during the first five years of life,” the Professors say.

The case is even stronger for giving the vaccine to Indigenous children, who face a greater disease burden as well as the extra stress of having to travel long distances for hospital admission.

Current vaccine prices exceed \$200 per course on the private market, making cost the only real issue in considering universal vaccination.

“A 1999 cost-benefit analysis suggested that break-even vaccine cost was \$78 per course,” Professors Barnes and Bishop say.

“However, the community should be prepared to pay something to prevent this wretched disease.”

In Australia, rotavirus infections lead to an estimated 10,000 hospitalisations every year.

In another article in the *MJA*, Rosalie Schultz, of the Alice Springs Centre for Disease Control, found that between 1995 and 2004, the rate of rotavirus notification in the NT was 0.98 per 100 per year for non-Indigenous children, and 2.75 per 100 per year for Indigenous children.

“An effective rotavirus vaccine could prevent considerable morbidity (disease) in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children,” Dr Schultz says, adding that any rotavirus vaccination program should be closely monitored to determine its effectiveness.

Rotavirus was discovered in Australia by Professor Bishop, Dr Ian Holmes and colleagues, in 1973.

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