

What does an immunisation coordinator/facilitator do?

Barbara Warren

Correspondence to: Barbara_warren@southlink.co.nz



Background

A hundred years ago almost all doctors in New Zealand were 'general practitioners' and they worked wherever people were sick, in hospitals, in patients' homes, and wherever they were called to attend to people's medical needs. Through the early to mid-twentieth century, specialisation became the name of the game, and 'specialist' doctors came to reside in hospitals while 'generalist doctors' cared for people outside.¹ They usually worked in the community, with only the support of their spouses (usually wives) and families. Receptionists and practice nurses joined them in the 1980s, and practice managers in the 1990s. Now in the 'zeroes' of the 21st century the list of professional groups engaged (at the frontline or behind the scenes) in providing health care to people in general practice has grown wider still. This is a short report about the work of immunisation coordinators, from one.

What do immunisation coordinators do?

In a nutshell, immunisation coordinators work to improve the quality of immunisation services and increase the coverage rates of scheduled vaccines. The role has grown since it began over 10 years ago from the popular description of 'fridge police' to a more health promoting, educating, leadership, mentoring and strategic planning role.

Great improvements have been made to the standards of vaccine handling and storage, also known as 'the cold chain'. Vaccinators (mainly gen-

eral practice nurses but also people from other primary, secondary and other areas such as correction services) tend to use the immunisation coordinator for advice, information, referral of clients needing complicated catch up schedules and troubleshooting cold chain problems. The general public also have direct access individually or for group discussion on immunisation issues.

Immunisation coordinators and facilitators are part of a wider network of immunisation professionals in New Zealand. 'District immunisation facilitators' are employed by The Immunisation Advisory Centre (IMAC) team attached to the University of Auckland and 'immunisation coordinators' by a range of employers such as Independent Practice Associations like South Link Health and Pegasus, Public Health Units and District Health

Boards. In the North Island there are 31 local coordinators/facilitators and there are 11 on the South Island. Four regional coordinators (three on the North Island and one on the South Island) all employed by IMAC, are responsible for the overall coordination and improvement of immunisation services within a region.

Like most immunisation coordinators, I have a nursing background, and many have general practice experience. Some have midwifery backgrounds, public health or laboratory

science experience. Professional development is self-determined and can vary. Some coordinators choose management or education pathways while others wish to pursue specialist or nurse practitioner goals. I am completing a Masters degree in Health Science with thesis research that will investigate the influenza vaccine coverage of New Zealand children and adults under age 65 years with chronic medical conditions.

Communicating information about vaccines, and in particular risk and benefits of immunisation to parents, is a challenge; a science and an art which immunisation coordinators are constantly trying to do better. The immune system is fascinating and complex,

but not something to be afraid of. Communicating the science is a rewarding part of the role thanks to the fabulous team at IMAC for the support they provide, especially in times of media scare story response.

Within the contract for immunisation services there is room to be flexible in meeting local needs. Working in Dunedin, I assist with medical student, student midwife and student nurse education. In the case of fifth year medical students, as well as a workshop on communicating

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with parents, a series of practical skills lab sessions are undertaken to learn hands on vaccine administration. Communicating to a wide variety of audiences in the most meaningful way can range from delivering a lecture to 300 Accident and Emergency nurses about tetanus to visits to Early Childhood Centres as Germelda the Germ Fairy to promote healthy messages to toddlers about how far a sneeze can travel.

The National Immunisation Schedule is reviewed every two years and immunisation coordinators are presently busy communicating the current changes to the schedule to vaccinators as well as information sharers such as midwives, hospital staff, Plunket and other Well Child

providers and family support agencies. 2008 is proving to be a busy year with several changes to enhance the schedule being implemented in stages throughout the year.

Immunisation coordinators are active each year in promoting the national influenza promotion, the theme 'Kung Flu' is new for 2008. The national emphasis this year is to encourage health workers to be immunised to protect their vulnerable patients, themselves and their families. Coordinators also promote seasonal influenza vaccination by talking to groups, displaying resources in the community for example to pharmacies and public libraries.

Immunisation coordinators/facilitators would like to work with

general practice to promote and provide:

- The highest quality in immunisation services
- Evidence-based practice
- Public and provider information, education and confidence
- High rates of immunisation coverage
- As a result of our working together low rates of vaccine preventable diseases.

Who is your local coordinator and your regional coordinator?

Go to www.immune.org.nz. Go to 'contact us' then district facilitators/coordinators for a current list or call 0800 IMMUNE, the IMAC dedicated immunisation telephone support service.

References

1. Wright-StClair R E. A history of general practice and of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners. Wellington: RNZCGP; 1989.