




A JAB FOR ALL

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ABDULLAH GETS HIS
VACCINATION: "I'M DOING
THE RIGHT THING FOR MYSELF
AND MY COMMUNITY."

Anastasia Safioleas joins the vaccination clinics protecting Australia's most vulnerable communities against COVID.

Today I'm getting my second jab and I feel good," says Abdullah. He's waiting his turn to enter the stately Art Deco building that is home to Melbourne community health organisation Cohealth. It's also now the site of their temporary vaccination clinic, complete with

PPE-clad nurses, social workers and rows of socially distanced chairs. Today they are vaccinating one of the most vulnerable groups in our community, people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

Abdullah is 58 and has had numerous bouts of sleeping rough. Just as the pandemic hit, he found himself homeless again. "I ended up going to a crisis centre in St Kilda, a place where you can also get needles and stuff, and they asked me if I needed emergency housing," he says. "One thing led to another, and I was put up in a hotel."

For 13 months Abdullah had a secure roof over his head, and says he enjoyed some of the simple things in life, like fresh towels. He was recently placed in long-term interim housing via the Victorian state government's From Homeless to a Home initiative. It's where he'll stay until he can secure permanent public housing.

It's time for Abdullah to receive his second dose. He secures his face mask. "I'm getting the vaccine because I figure half the population is almost done, so I might as well join in and do the right thing," he says, making his way inside and to one of the waiting nurses. "If everybody did the right thing and lined up and got their jabs, pretty soon there'd be no COVID-19 to worry about in Australia. I'm doing the right thing for myself and my community."

More than 116,000 Australians are homeless. Not only are they at greater risk of exposure to COVID, they also face significant barriers to accessing the vaccine and other health supports.

"Those living in high-density accommodation, such as rooming houses or overcrowded housing, are more vulnerable to COVID-19 because of shared entries and exits and shared living spaces," explains Dr Nadia Chaves, an infectious diseases specialist and chair of C-19 Network, a Victorian consortium of not-for-profit community health organisations convened last year to provide COVID testing to vulnerable communities. "And people who live in temporary accommodation, high-density housing and rough sleepers face multiple barriers to accessing COVID-19 vaccinations and are at risk of contracting COVID-19."

The health impacts of homelessness are already considerable. It leads to significantly higher rates of morbidity, disability and chronic illness. International research also shows that those with a stable place to call home live on average 30 years longer than those without one.



COHEALTH NURSE EVITA ARCE
IN HER ALL-IMPORTANT PPE



DANIEL FROM COHEALTH
CHATS WITH RESIDENT SANJ



AFTER HIS VACCINATION,
ABDULLAH WAITS WITH
BEN QUINN

When a person's basic needs such as safe housing, secure work or adequate access to food are not easily met, accessing medical services such as "a vaccination or testing is not necessarily a priority," says Dr Chaves.

"These disadvantages may also intersect with other significant issues such as mental health or chronic physical conditions. Lockdowns make everything more difficult to access, including regular medical care. And booking a vaccination through an online portal and navigation of a health website for health information may prove very challenging."

Ben Quinn is part of a specialist team that supports homeless health. As well as working at Cohealth's permanent location in Melbourne's CBD, he has been heading out with their mobile vaccination clinic to hotels-turned-emergency accommodation, used to shelter rough sleepers during the pandemic. When we meet, at a small city hotel housing 45 residents, a pop-up vaccination clinic has been set up in the hotel's tiny reception, a space ordinarily occupied by a sign-in desk and a pair of armchairs.

Quinn is all too familiar with the significant health barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness. "They experience discrimination, they don't have ID or a Medicare card, they're not linked into a GP clinic and don't have access to reliable information," he says. "It means many members of the homeless community don't feel comfortable or safe accessing a vaccination hub or GP clinics."

"For those reasons it's really important that we break down those barriers. One way of doing that is to bring the vaccines to where people are living or spending time. It's also about providing information in a way that connects with the homeless community from a trusted source."

Which brings us to Jimmy Rose, a tall and softly spoken "western suburbs lad", who knows firsthand what it's like to be homeless. Today he's a peer-support worker, helping to break down myths around COVID and provide greater access to those wanting to get vaccinated. Earlier that morning Rose and a Cohealth social worker knocked on the door of each room, letting residents know they were offering Pfizer vaccines downstairs.

"I reassure them the best I can," he says. "If they have any questions we'll go and ask the nurse. And I tell them that I've had the jab and that I'm still here. That you're more likely to win TattsLotto than have serious side effects. There's a lot of misinformation out there."

Nurse Julie Smith, clinic manager of St Vincent de Paul's Matthew Talbot Hostel, a crisis accommodation centre located in Sydney's Woolloomooloo, has witnessed the misinformation and distrust among her vulnerable patients. But says there are ways to combat this.

"You've got to offer the vaccine in a way that is enthusiastic and positive and assertive but not coercive," Smith says. "People don't want to be made to have

something – nobody likes that. And you have to be consistent. Keep coming back and be in the same place.

"We continue to turn up to the hub in Woolloomooloo every Thursday with doctors, nurses and support workers. Over time, it's grown so the word has spread. People who were hesitant have changed their minds. That has changed the minds of their neighbours."

The hub has been a runaway success. Their first clinic in May saw just over 100 people turn up to get the jab. Today they have queues of between 400 to 500 people. So far they have vaccinated close to 4000 homeless and vulnerable Sydneysiders through the hub.

Baptist Care SA in Adelaide are adopting a similar approach. Their WestCare Centre offers free meals, hot showers and laundry facilities, as well as emergency relief. And as of July they have been hosting a pop-up vaccination clinic, and have administered more than 200 vaccines.

Back in Melbourne, Cohealth vaccination nurse Harshpreet Kaur has been travelling site to site, vaccinating rough sleepers. Yesterday they set up in a car park. Today they're in a hotel's reception. So far Cohealth have administered more than 800 vaccines through their pop-up clinics. Kaur admits it's a long road.

"Some days you have 15 or 20 people coming to get vaccinated and then at other sites you don't have anyone," she says. "Some people have a good understanding of the vaccination process but for others you really need to go through the process with them. The social workers help us with this."

At today's pop-up vaccination clinic in the city hotel, five of the 45 hotel residents decide to get vaccinated. Ben Quinn is happy with this number. He'll continue the conversation with those who need time to think about it, and expects more will decide to get the jab once they are comfortable.

"For many it's the first time they've even thought about getting the COVID vaccine, so we need to give them the space to think about it," he says. "We often see people come back to us and get it after they've thought about it some more and had a chance to speak to their friends about it."

Abdullah is less diplomatic. "A friend of mine won't do it yet. He's holding off to see what will happen to other people. I told him he's going to eventually have to get the vaccine so you might as well get it done now. There's no use changing your mind when you're dead."

TO FIND YOUR NEAREST VACCINATION CLINIC,
VISIT HEALTH.GOV.AU.



HARSHPREET KAUR
WITH TREVOR,
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