

WICKED CHOICE IN VAX DIVIDE

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FULL TEXT

EXCLUSIVE AGED-CARE residents were prioritised over workers for the Covid-19 jab because of the “wicked problem” caused by early supply shortages, a key adviser to the federal government says.

Dr Richard Kidd, a member of the independent immunisation panel, said the mandatory vaccination of aged-care staff was “highly desirable” but not possible without more doses at the start of the rollout.

The government admitted on Tuesday it had no idea how many workers had got the jab, even though all of them were supposed to be protected two months ago.

Almost 40,000 have received at least one dose through nursing home clinics, including 10,608 in Victoria out of a workforce of 235,000, while a survey of major providers with 60,000 staff found that barely one in 10 had been vaccinated.

After the virus breached the defences of Victorian aged-care homes this week, the state government has put aged-care workers at the front of the vaccination queue.

At the same time, 50 roving clinics are going back into nursing homes. Dr Kidd, who sits on the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation’s vaccine utilisation and prioritisation committee, said the principles for phase 1A of the rollout were to protect those most at risk of getting very sick or dying.

But he said there were a “huge number” of staff in the ring around aged-care residents, including nurses, carers, cleaners, cooks and delivery drivers.

“Much bigger than the amount of vaccine that was going to be available. And that’s been the wicked problem,” Dr Kidd said.

“It wasn’t so clear –when there wasn’t enough vaccine to even vaccinate all of the residents straight up –whether we should vaccinate the staff as well.” Aged Care Services Minister Richard Colbeck said health advice from international experience drove the decision not to jab residents and staff at the same time.

“We wanted to get it done as quickly as possible before winter; we’re comfortable with where we’re at,” he said. But Dr Kidd said vaccinating aged-care workers could have been done “a bit better”, and authorities needed to be “very disciplined” in the coming months to finish the key rollout phase.

Sources involved in the rollout said it was hampered by advice to keep a gap of two weeks between flu and Covid-19 shots, meaning some aged-care visits had to be rescheduled.

Outbreaks of rhinovirus, which is responsible for the common cold, also slowed progress as health staff were unable to visit affected facilities to administer vaccines.

Some vaccine workers have had to dedicate all their time to delivering catch-up jabs at facilities where residents initially missed out.

Federal Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese said the rollout in aged care had been a debacle with human consequences.

Dr Kidd, the Australian Medical Association’s council of general practice chairman, said GPs had great capacity to vaccinate more people if they had more supplies.

From Wednesday to Sunday, aged-care workers will be given priority access at 10 state government walk-in vaccination hubs.

Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley said the state was “stepping in” to protect “those who work in our most

vulnerable settings”.

Australia’s medical expert panel will on Wednesday consider the mandatory vaccinations of aged-care workers after Prime Minister Scott Morrison asked for it to be -reconsidered.

If enforced, law expert Maria O’Sullivan said -employers could not discriminate if workers could not get the job because of a medical exemption.

However, there could be an argument that it was -essential to perform the job. The Monash University lecturer said under human rights law people would have to prove they had a conscientious objection, which could include religion.

Maurice Blackburn principal lawyer Giri Sivaraman said there was unlikely to be a legal barrier to forced vaccinations for critical workers, given the Fair Work Commission upheld rules mandating flu shots for workers in aged-care and childcare services.

Aged and Community Services Australia chairwoman Sara Blunt demanded the government “stop blaming” aged-care workers about the rollout, saying wider and easier access to jobs was needed.

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