

Vaccine rates dive as COVID ramps up

Damon Cronshaw

COVID vaccine rates in the Hunter have plummeted to 14 per cent of people aged 18 and over, federal health data show.

The region's take-up of vaccines against the virus began to decline after the first two doses, which occurred during public health orders and workplace mandates.

For the first two doses, all areas in the region recorded vaccination rates of about 94 per cent or higher. But for the third dose, rates declined significantly to as low as 63 per cent in Cessnock and a high of 74 per cent in Newcastle. For the fourth dose, rates fell to a low of 45 per cent in Cessnock and a high of 52 per cent in Lake Macquarie.

Since December last year, there were no public health orders in force in NSW that mandated COVID-19 vaccination. Workplaces have also eased their stance on

vaccine mandates. The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) now recommends boosters mainly for older people and those with medical comorbidities. Its latest advice states that no further doses are recommended for those with no risk factors who have had a jab this year.

Professor Nathan Bartlett, of Hunter Medical Research Institute, said most people have had "multiple vaccinations and been infected by the virus".

"We've all got some level of immunity," said Professor Bartlett, a University of Newcastle virologist. "There's no evidence the virus is getting any more pathogenic. Infections for most people are fairly mild. It's becoming perceived as a common cold type virus. For people who are fit and healthy and not in the risk groups, that's probably OK."

The *Newcastle Herald* reported on Friday a new COVID wave had hit the Hunter-New

England district with 39 people in hospital and nine aged-care home outbreaks. Professor Bartlett said he would personally consider an annual COVID booster, if he hadn't been infected with the virus in a year.

Pfizer and Moderna's mRNA vaccines, in particular, have attracted criticism among people who believe they aren't safe or effective. Former Australian Medical Association (AMA) president Dr Kerry Phelps said last year she and her partner both suffered vaccine injuries. In a submission to federal parliament's "long COVID" inquiry, she said "vaccine injury is a subject that few in the medical profession have wanted to talk about".

"It is possible that there is at least some shared pathophysiology between vaccine injury and long COVID, possibly due to the effects of spike protein," said Ms Phelps, a former federal MP.

The latest Therapeutic Goods Administration [TGA] vaccine safety report, released on Thursday, said "vaccination against COVID-19 is the most effective way to reduce deaths and severe illness from infection".

"The protective benefits of vaccination far outweigh the potential risks," the report said.

Professor Bartlett said there was "absolutely no doubt that the COVID vaccines work and provide excellent levels of protection, particularly for severe disease".

Dr David Durrheim, a Hunter public health physician, said the mRNA technology was "a marvellous platform".

"We now have so many millions of people who have safely had the vaccine and we've been monitoring for side effects, particularly in Australia," Dr Durrheim said.

"The virus kills people and the vaccine protects people. To me the equation is a simple one."



Jets captains Cassidy Davis and Brandon O'Neill at McDonald Jones Stadium ahead of this Sunday's double-header. Picture by Peter Lorimer

Jets hoping to be hottest in the game this

Lucinda Garbutt-Young

NEWCASTLE Jets are hoping to be the hottest ticket in town this weekend as they play their first home games of the season.

Both A-League men and women's teams will go head-to-head against the Western Sydney Wanderers on Sunday in what the club hopes will be record-breaking games.

After a stellar grand final win for the men's team in the 2017-18 season to a crowd of 29,000, the club has seen a dip in supporter numbers.

They were hit hard by COVID-19 closures for a few seasons and men's home game attendance averaged were just 6152 last year. The current record for a woman's home game is 4168.

"We're looking forward to a huge turnout this weekend," captain Cassidy Davis said, following a win and draw for her team in their first games this season.

And she is in for a treat as more than 10,000 northern NSW students join the women for a football revival.

The Jets:LEARN program, funded by Greater Bank, allows students to learn skills

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Cassidy Davis

from their sporting heroes. 130 schools have registered this year.

Ms Davis said engaging with regional schools was a "big focus" for the team.

"We've seen a huge lift in interest generally and the engagement levels when we visit the school with our players are incredible," she said.

"We're excited to see this response translate into attendance at our home matches, starting this Sunday."

■ More Jets, Sport

Second man faces court over young dad's killing

Nick Bielby

THE second man charged with the alleged murder of a father at a Hunter home remains behind bars after the matter had its first mention in court.

Police charged Jarryd Nickerson, 24, on Thursday over last year's fatal shooting of Zachery Davies-Scott. The Bellbird Heights man did not personally appear before Magistrate Ian Rodgers when the matter went before Cessnock Local Court on Friday. Magistrate Rodgers ordered the brief of evidence be served by January 12 and adjourned the matter to Newcastle Local Court on January 17.

Mr Nickerson did not apply for bail, and it was formally refused.

The 25-year-old, known by many in the community as 'Donnie', was gunned down in a home on Traders Way at Heddon Greta just before 11pm on December 27 last year. Mr Davies-Scott's pregnant fiancée, young children - aged 4 and 2 at the time - and parents were inside the house when the shot was fired. He died at the scene. A 52-year-old woman also suffered minor injuries during the alleged attack.

Investigators made a breakthrough in the case on Tuesday, when they arrested and charged 25-year-old Talon Dean with Mr Davies-Scott's alleged murder.

He remains in custody. Police said in a statement on Thursday morning the investigation was ongoing.

■ Crime Stoppers: 1800 333 000.