



MEDIA STATEMENT

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AMSANT welcomes Commonwealth diphtheria support package as outbreak response intensifies

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) has welcomed the Commonwealth's emergency support package to support the response to the growing diphtheria outbreak across northern Australia, including additional vaccines, surge workforce support and expanded public health measures.

More than 220 cases of diphtheria have now been recorded nationally in 2026, primarily in the Northern Territory, making it the largest outbreak seen in Australia in decades. The overwhelming majority of cases are affecting Aboriginal people, including in remote and very remote communities.

AMSANT CEO Donna Ah Chee said the package is an important step in supporting frontline health services and strengthening vaccination and outbreak response efforts across affected regions.

"We welcome the Commonwealth working closely with the Northern Territory Government and the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to respond quickly to this outbreak," Ms Ah Chee said.

"This additional support will help services continue vaccination, contact tracing and community outreach efforts at a time when many clinics, particularly those in remote areas, are already under significant pressure."

Diphtheria is a serious bacterial infection that spreads through respiratory droplets or direct contact with infected skin sores. While it can be severe, early treatment is effective, and vaccination remains the best protection against serious illness.

Ms Ah Chee urged Territorians to check their vaccination status and seek medical care early if they experience symptoms.

"If you or your child have a sore throat, cough, fever or skin sores that are not healing, it's important to visit your local clinic early," she said. "Vaccination works. We are seeing that people who are vaccinated are much less likely to become seriously unwell."

Ms Ah Chee said the Commonwealth support package is particularly important because it will help strengthen surge workforce capacity and reduce pressure on local clinics already managing high levels of need.

"Many remote clinics are already working incredibly hard to deliver routine primary healthcare in challenging conditions," she said.

"During outbreaks like this, health services are often forced to redirect staff and resources into emergency vaccination, contact tracing and outbreak management. It is critical that essential primary healthcare isn't disrupted because clinics are stretched beyond capacity."

“That’s why additional workforce support and properly resourced community-led responses are so important.”

“Outbreak responses cannot be sustained without strong community-controlled primary healthcare services.”

AMSANT said the outbreak has again highlighted the importance of culturally safe, community-led healthcare, particularly in remote communities where overcrowded housing and limited access to services can increase the spread of infectious disease.

Ms Ah Chee said improving immunisation rates in remote communities requires more than making vaccines available. The outbreak highlights the need to protect those most at risk, particularly in remote communities.

“Vaccination works, but access can be much more complicated in remote communities,” she said.

“We know overcrowded housing and limited access to services can increase the spread of infectious diseases in remote communities and affect how quickly vaccines can reach people. That’s why long-term investment in housing, a strong workforce and community-controlled primary healthcare remains so important.”

She said Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) are central to the response because they are trusted by community and already embedded on the ground.

“In remote communities, public health is about relationships, trust and workforce as much as it is about supply,” Ms Ah Chee said.

“Our community-controlled services know their communities, understand the challenges people are facing and are best placed to deliver vaccination and public health messaging in culturally safe ways.”

AMSANT is encouraging Territorians to:

- Make sure children are up to date with routine vaccinations, including adolescent boosters
- Check their own vaccination status with their local clinic or GP
- Seek care early if they have symptoms or concerns

Ms Ah Chee said the focus now must remain on ensuring communities can access vaccines, treatment and clear information quickly.

“This outbreak is serious, but it is also preventable,” she said.

“Vaccination remains the best protection against serious illness. The faster we can get vaccines, treatment and trusted health information into communities, the better we can protect people and stop further spread.”

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