

## **Policy brief on Enhancing influenza protection for Asia Pacific older adult population**

### **OVERVIEW**

On 28 September 2024, a roundtable discussion, co-chaired by Kim Sampson, Executive Director of the Asia Pacific Alliance for the Control of Influenza (APACI), and Dr. LJ Tan, Chief Policy & Partnerships Officer at Immunize.org, explored strategies to enhance influenza vaccine coverage and accessibility for the elderly in the Asia Pacific region. The event, supported by Sanofi, convened a panel of experts (see below) to address key barriers, share best practices, and propose actionable solutions for improving vaccination rates and enhancing influenza protection for Asia Pacific's older adult population.

### **KEY BARRIERS TO FLU VACCINE UPTAKE**

APACI, a leading regional alliance, has previously organized policy roundtables in Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan to address the challenges of protecting older adults from influenza. Notable barriers identified include:

- Low Awareness: Limited knowledge about influenza vaccines among both the public and healthcare professionals.
- Accessibility: Limited access to vaccines.

Kim from APACI highlighted the recent policy shift under Singapore's Healthier SG scheme, which now offers free influenza vaccines to adults over 65, aiming to boost vaccination rates. Similarly, APACI shared details of a pilot initiative in Thailand that provides enhanced influenza vaccines (HD) under the CSMBS civil servant insurance scheme, setting a new standard for protecting older adults in the country. Dr LJ from immunize.org shared that since the introduction of enhanced influenza vaccines, vaccines effectiveness has shown to drive the uptake in the States.

### **MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COALITION AND COMMUNICATIONS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE**

Dr LJ pointed that these same barriers to influenza vaccination have been observed elsewhere, and explained how a multi-stakeholder immunization coalition has played a crucial role in addressing these challenges, particularly among high-risk groups such as older adults in the U.S. This sparked a discussion among the expert panelists about leveraging coalitions to overcome barriers, with the ultimate goal of increasing influenza vaccination rates.

Dr. LJ shared encouraging data showing how coalitions have improved VCR, emphasizing that regular alignment using consistent language is key to sustaining the importance of influenza vaccinations, and building confidence in the programs.

Strengthening data-driven disease prevention was another essential point raised, with a WHO representative highlighting the availability of surveillance tools to help countries project influenza cases.

While surveillance data is vital for monitoring and projecting influenza trends, the panel also emphasized the need for robust systems that link surveillance data to national disease burdens,

including hospitalisations. A Chinese expert underlined that understanding the true, broader burden of influenza in a given country on healthcare systems, could help in government decision making in investments in influenza programs.

In terms of communications and awareness, a Vietnamese expert echoed Dr. LJ's point that unified recommendations from medical associations are critical for raising awareness and increasing confidence in vaccination. A Singaporean expert shared a successful example where clear communication of disease burden led to positive uptake of shingles vaccine, with older populations willing to pay out of pocket. Another important component is civil society, where the voice of the Elderly or people affected by severe influenza can bring an important dimension from the public, and can even be integrated into a Coalition.

Turning to access, Australia's experience with pharmacy-based immunizations, especially post-COVID-19, was cited as another example of how pharmacists can play a crucial role in trusted healthcare professional communication, with multiple opportunities to raise the importance in at-risk people.

The value of leveraging existing alliances – like APACI- and networks to support national initiatives, such as the China Influenza Summit was touched on.

## CONCLUSION

A multi-stakeholder coalition can be a powerful tool to promote influenza vaccine awareness and uptake through data-driven communications across Asia Pacific. Dr. LJ concluded by emphasizing “Start small with a clear goal, and plan for future scale-up” and encouraged consideration of creating a Coalitions as an enabler to help governments improve flu policy implementation.

## EXPERT PANEL



*From Left to Right: Le, Dinh Tam, Dr. Shoshanna Goldin, Dr. Dac Phu Tran, Prof Pinyo, Lyn Morgan, Dr Dorothy Ng, Dr Stephanie Sutjipto, Prof Yuelong Shu, Kim Sampson, Dr LJ Tan, Prof David Smith, Dr Sheena Sullivan, Ada Wong*

## **EXPERTS**

- Dr. Dac Phu Tran, member of Vietnam’s National Immunization Technical Advisory Group (NITAG) Associate Professor Dr Tran Dac Phu, former Director of the Department of Preventive Medicine and current Chairman of the Ministry of Health’s National Immunisation Technical Advisory Group
- Prof David Smith, Clinical Virologist and Deputy Chief Pathologist at PathWest Laboratory Medicine WA at the Queen Elizabeth II Medical Centre in Perth Western Australia. He is also Clinical Professor in the School of Medicine at the University of Western Australia. His other roles include Director of Research and Innovation at PathWest and clinical lead for the Arbovirus Research and Surveillance Laboratory
- Dr Dorothy Ng, Singapore Singhealth
- Dr Sheena Sullivan, Head of Epidemiology for the WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza and an Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne
- Dr. Shoshanna Goldin – WHO Geneva Lead for Seasonal Influenza vaccination policies and programs
- Dr Stephanie Sutjipto, Singapore Singapore's National Centre for Infectious Diseases.
- Associate Professor Pinyo, infectious disease specialist at Siriraj Hospital, part of Mahidol University
- Prof. Yuelong Shu, Chair APACI
- Lyn Morgan, Global Head of Public Affairs, Influenza and Pandemic Vaccines Sanofi
- Ada Wong, Head of Public Affairs, Vaccines Asia Pacific Sanofi

