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THE DAILY VAX RACE GIVING FALSE HOPE

The political rhetoric at daily COVID-19 briefings that the ticket to freedom for city dwellers is reaching up to 80 per cent vaccination coverage, is giving them false hope, according to the National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance).

Alliance CEO Dr Gabrielle O’Kane says, “We are concerned about the rise of this ‘vax race’ between the state and territory leaders because it risks distorting the Doherty Institute Modelling Report”.

“The daily messaging suggests the likes of Sydney and Melbourne can open up the second they reach the 80 milestone. However, this is too simplistic because the Doherty Report warns that for the transition to be successful, vaccination rates in rural, regional and remote areas also need to reach up to 80 per cent, whereas most are currently below the national average.”

The Alliance is seriously concerned about the growing geographic disparity in vaccination rates and is seeking reassurance that governments won’t fail to protect the seven million residents in rural Australia.

“From the Australian Government’s available data, it is evident that a significant proportion of regions with the lowest vaccination rates are in rural, regional and remote Australia, with many of these communities having less than 25 per cent of their people vaccinated.

“This vaccination disparity is seriously concerning, which is why the Alliance has written to Australian Health Minister Greg Hunt to reinforce the Doherty’s finding that, ‘Achievement of these targets [70-80 per cent] at small area level will be critical to ensure equity of program impact, as ongoing outbreaks in under-vaccinated populations are reasonably anticipated from international experience’.

Dr O’Kane says, “There is concern among rural communities that governments will discard suppression policies too hastily while vaccination rates in many rural and remote communities have not reached the required threshold levels to prevent the consequences of potentially high levels of community transmission”.

The Alliance’s letter to the Minister welcomed the scale up of the vaccination rollout in the rural communities dealing with COVID-19 transmission in NSW and Victoria.

“While acknowledging the Government’s support and the excellent work being done by our Members such as the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the dangerous truth is that vaccination coverage rates across the country remain lower than in many metropolitan areas and lower than the national average.

“Rural, regional and remote communities would therefore welcome an assurance from government that they will not be forgotten in the transition to a ‘living with COVID’ future and that their communities will not be prematurely exposed to high levels of disease prior to their being adequately protected through vaccination and other population health measures,” Dr O’Kane said.

Dr Gabrielle O’Kane is available for comment.

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