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More testing finds more coughing

Erik Jensen

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THE outbreak of whooping cough in NSW has more to do with better diagnosis than with lack of immunisation, according to one of the state's foremost experts in the field.

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Robert Booy, a professor of child health at the Children's Hospital at Westmead, said there was no doubt whooping cough increased in areas with low vaccination rates.

But there is no evidence to suggest vaccination rates have fallen in NSW, where about 90 per cent of children are immunised.

If anything, he said, there has been an increased uptake in booster shots among adults.

"If you look back 10 years ago the peak diagnoses then were lower, but there were quite a few more deaths. In terms of severity of disease, I think we are improving, but we have an illusion that we have a lot of whooping cough disease. We're just testing a lot more," he said.

Figures from NSW Health show cases of whooping cough have increased three-fold against figures from the same months last year, beginning with a high of 1433 reported cases in January. The newest figures, for June, show 655 reported cases - on track to come close in number to the last outbreak in 2009, when reported cases exceeded 12,500.

Sufferers are overwhelmingly primary school-aged, with the largest number of cases in children aged five to nine. Another smaller spike exists among people in their 40s.

In her first months as Health Minister, Jillian Skinner extended the provision of a free whooping cough vaccine to people who have contact with children. Almost 600,000 doses of whooping cough vaccine have been distributed in NSW since March 2009.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/more-testing-finds-more-coughing-20110703-1gxcw.html>