Letter to the editor: Australian immunisation registers: established foundations and opportunities for improvement

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To the editor:

In their recent article on the Australian immunisation registers [1] Chin et al. recognise the potential value of linking immunisation registers with healthcare outcome data for public health benefit by enabling rapid investigation of population-level vaccine safety and effectiveness. While the national Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR) has been linked on two occasions to examine vaccine safety, [2,3] it has not been linked to health outcome data to investigate vaccine effectiveness.

As Chin et al. mention, Queensland and the Northern Territory have separate jurisdiction-level immunisation registers. These registers, which are not subject to the same privacy legislation inhibiting linkage of ACIR data, have been used to calculate effectiveness for rotavirus [4,5], pneumococcal [6] and pertussis-containing vaccines (unpublished data) by linking immunisation with outcome data such as hospitalisations and disease notifications.

These studies demonstrate the usefulness of linking data from immunisation registers to assess vaccine effectiveness and the importance jurisdiction-level immunisation registers have played in allowing evaluation of large publicly-funded immunisation programmes.

Individual privacy must be protected. However, data linkage does not pose a significant threat to privacy and has the potential to contribute efficiently and substantially to public health. One could argue that the ethical obligation, seen from a population as well as individual perspective, is to ensure routinely-collected health information is efficiently and optimally used to achieve the greatest public benefit, while protecting the individual’s privacy.

In setting up jurisdictional or national immunisation registers to achieve the greatest public benefit, we recommend thought be given to enabling easy linkage of data, in practical and legal terms, between immunisation and health outcome data.

References