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Indigenous communities 'think they're immune to Covid': Pat Turner

By **PAIGE TAYLOR**, INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT

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The full lockdown of remote Aboriginal communities during the first wave of the pandemic was “too successful” and now many Indigenous people believe Covid-19 will never reach them, according to evidence to a select committee on Australia’s response to the virus.

Pat Turner, who represents Aboriginal health clinics across Australia as head of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, has offered the most comprehensive explanation yet for why so few Indigenous Australians are vaccinated against Covid-19.

Ms Turner told the select committee on Thursday she was deeply concerned about the consequences for Indigenous Australians when the nation opened up because only 37 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population over the age of 12 was fully vaccinated. Only 50 per cent had received one dose.

Aboriginal people had died at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal Australians during the Delta outbreak in NSW and Victoria, Ms Turner said.

Up until June 16, only 153 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had contracted Covid-19 and none of them had died.

However, since the outbreak of the Delta strain in NSW and Victoria, more than 4500 Indigenous people had tested positive to Covid-19, more than 500 of them have required hospitalisation and 10 had died.

Ms Turner said this was entirely predictable given that higher proportions of Indigenous people are susceptible to falling seriously ill and dying from Covid-19 because they have developed chronic

disease early in life. Also, one in eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in overcrowded housing which helps the virus spread. Overcrowding is far worse in regional and remote areas, she told the select committee.

Ms Turner said her organisation had told parliament in July last year that if Covid-19 got into the far western community of Wilcannia it would be impossible to contain, and that is what happened.

While Ms Turner's organisation had planned early in consultation with the commonwealth and began vaccinating Indigenous people with AstraZeneca in late March, advice in April that Pfizer was the preferred vaccine for people under 50 caused significant delays.

Once cold storage chains were established to transport Pfizer to regional and remote Aboriginal medical clinics, the number of weekly doses being administered to Indigenous people across Australia increased fourfold between March and September.

However, Ms Turner said, vaccine hesitancy and misinformation were causing big problems in Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Queensland. Health workers were now going door to door to answer Aboriginal people's questions about the vaccines. While there, they vaccinate those who are willing.

"They think it's not going to get there, so we are increasing our advice to them about how rapidly it spread from greater Sydney to Wilcannia," Ms Turner told the select committee.

She said states and the NT must organise contingency plans for Aboriginal communities. She said locking down remote communities at the start of the pandemic was successful but it would not work once Australia opened its borders.

"I think we were too successful (during the first lockdowns of remote Aboriginal communities)," Ms Turner said.

"They think they're immune to Covid, but they're not."

Ms Turner said the vaccine misinformation spread in Indigenous communities included that Covid-19 was a white man's disease and that the government was using Indigenous people as guinea pigs.

“And there is very disturbing targeted misinformation from religious groups emanating from the United States and spread by local people in Australia — white people getting into Aboriginal communities,” she said.

“It should be acknowledged that many of these false ideas have their origins in years of mistreatment of Aboriginal people by government and medical research institutions.”

Ms Turner said she met weekly with Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt and Aboriginal leaders such as Pastor Ray Minniecon as part of a national campaign to counter the misinformation and encourage Indigenous people to protect themselves and their families by getting vaccinated. This has included a national advertising campaign on television and social media.

PAIGE TAYLOR, INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT, WA BUREAU CHIEF

Paige Taylor is from the West Australian goldmining town of Kalgoorlie and went to school all over the place including Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and Sydney's north shore. She has been a reporter sin... [Read more](#)



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