Deputy Premier of Western Australia
Minister for Health; Tourism

Our Ref: 25-24471

Mr Ken McLeod
 turlinja@internode.on.net

Dear Mr McLeod

Thank you for your e-mail of 30 November 2011, addressed to Hon Robyn McSweeney MLC, Minister for Child Protection, in which you alert Minister McSweeney to your concerns about a parent advocating on the Australian Vaccine Network (AVN) the benefits of deliberately exposing their child to the chicken pox virus. As this issue falls within the health portfolio, Minister McSweeney has referred your letter to the Office of the Minister for Health, Hon Dr Kim Hames MLA, for a direct response.

I note your concern about the potential adverse health affects that could arise from this child being deliberately exposed to the chicken pox virus. Although chicken pox causes a relatively mild illness in most, around 1 in 100,000 people develop encephalitis and about 3 in 100,000 people die from the complications of this infection. It is true that chicken pox infection earlier in life leads to a lower rate of complications than when infected as an adult. Immunisation against chicken pox not only prevents the discomfort of the primary disease but it lessens the risk of severe complications of the disease.

You are correct in stating that chicken pox as a child does not prevent shingles as an adult. The chicken pox virus survives in the dorsal root ganglia of the infected person’s spinal cord, and can re-emerge to cause shingles in later life.

I have been advised by the Western Australian Department of Child Protection that this is not a child protection issue. The WA Department of Health believes that the existing approach of providing the public with accurate information on vaccine preventable diseases is the preferred strategy. Fortunately, people with extreme views on immunisation, such as those attributed to Ms Elphinstone, are in a small minority.

Thank you for bringing this matter to the Minister’s attention.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Ian Wight-Pickin
Chief of Staff

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