Childhood vaccinations lag in Upper Mountains

By Jennie Curtin
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A significant area of the Upper Mountains — postcode 2780 which encompasses Leura, Katoomba and Medlow Bath — has been found to have one of the lowest rates of vaccination of infants in the country.

The area was among five postcodes with one of the lowest immunisation rates for one-year-old, two-year-old and five-year-old children in 2011-12, the National Health Performance Authority found.

A year later, the rates of one- and five-year-olds who had been immunised had increased in postcode 2780 but the rates of fully immunised two-year-olds had fallen even further.

Just 77 per cent of two-year-olds had been immunised in Katoomba-Leura in 2012-13, compared with 92 per cent in the Springwood 2777 postcode area.

In one-year-olds, 81 per cent in Katoomba-Leura had received vaccinations, compared with 95 per cent of Springwood infants; and with five-year-olds, the figures were 85 per cent compared with 93 per cent.
Chairman of the board of Nepean-Blue Mountains Medicare Local, Dr Shiva Prakash, said the childhood vaccination schedule starts when a child is born and is not completed until they receive their final immunisation between three-and-a-half and four years of age.

“Starting preschool, rather than starting primary school, is an ideal time to check your child’s immunisation status,” Dr Prakash said. “Preschools and child care centres are places where children interact very closely and it is vital they are fully protected against a whole range of severe preventable diseases.”

Alice and Wes Haynes from Katoomba have chosen to vaccinate their three children. Mrs Haynes, a nurse, said her profession probably made her more aware of the need for prevention.

The couple were also affected by a television program on a baby who had been too young to immunise and had caught whooping cough from someone who had not been vaccinated. The baby later died.

Mr Haynes said the program was “gut-wrenching”.

While the couple thought parents should be able to choose how to raise their children, when it came to vaccination, “it’s other people’s safety you’re talking about”, Mr Haynes said.

While immunisation programs help protect the community against a number of diseases, the level of protection relies on a high coverage rate.

Dr Prakash said if coverage was less than 95 per cent, there was an increased risk of an outbreak of diseases such as measles and whooping cough.

“Nepean-Blue Mountains Medicare Local is working on improving immunisation levels by working closely with local GPs and the local health district.”

Under legislation introduced this year, parents have to provide a vaccination history to the child care centre or preschool.

Parents can also present evidence that their child has a medical reason why it can’t be vaccinated or that the parents themselves have a conscientious objection to vaccination.

The National Immunisation Program protects children against serious diseases that are still widespread in other areas of the world including measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, polio, hepatitis B and invasive pneumococcal disease.