

## **‘Disregard your phone’: Uncle Jack tells Indigenous community to get vaxxed**



*Uncle Jack Charles lays it on the line at the Victoria Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy Melbourne.*

By Jack Latimore  
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New figures show vaccination rates in Victoria’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are still lagging well behind those in the broader population, prompting a fresh campaign to try to sell the benefits of the jab.

Veteran performer and Aboriginal Elder, Uncle Jack Charles, has fronted the latest campaign to try to redress the difference, in which 78 per cent of eligible Indigenous people in Victoria were fully vaccinated with two doses compared with 89.3 per cent of the broader population.

About 85 per cent of Indigenous people in Victoria aged 12 years and over had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 93.5 per cent of the rest of the state.

While there have been no major outbreaks in Indigenous communities in Victoria since the pandemic began, Aboriginal leaders and public health practitioners have expressed concern about the effect of the Delta strain since restrictions began to ease.

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations medical adviser, Dr Jason Agostino, told *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* that Indigenous communities needed to be at a minimum of 90 per cent double vaccination coverage before the state borders in South Australia and Queensland should open.

In September, it was revealed that a computer program used by the national immunisation register had incorrectly inflated the data on Indigenous vaccination numbers in the state, belatedly alerting authorities of how short Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians were from the one-dose target of 80 per cent before lockdown restrictions were eased at the end of October.

NACCHO chief executive Pat Turner told a federal Senate hearing in October that the sector held “significant concerns” for Indigenous communities across the country. In the Northern Territory, an outbreak of 35 cases has reached poor Aboriginal communities at the edge of Katherine, and in NSW a large outbreak has hit Moree, north-west of Sydney.

The new campaign was launched at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) on Monday and aims to drive the rate of vaccination above 90 per cent in Indigenous communities before the start of the Christmas and New Year season.

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Uncle Jack, a client of VAHS, said the centre had saved his life from serious illnesses in the past and now he was double vaccinated and booked in for a booster shot in December.

“As soon as it was available here at VAHS, I came in and booked an appointment to get my shot. It is incumbent on the likes of myself ... to share the journey, to get that shot and tell everybody I’ve had the shot,” he said.

“I’m a firm believer in imploring people to disregard the messages you hear on your [computer] and your phone. Believe what I’m telling you: You need to get vaccinated.”

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations chief Jill Gallagher thanked Uncle Jack for his leadership, and acknowledged the service provided by front-line workers at VAHS.

“Sleepless nights, back-to-back meetings with community providing the vaccine: I think that’s really important. We’ve still got a bit of work to do. I encourage all the mob to protect yourself and protect your community.”

VAHS general manager of operations Gavin Brown said: “We need our mob to keep getting vaccinated. It’s really important that we continue to promote vaccinations. It makes it safer for our community and better for our mob.”

Victorian Minister for Health Martin Foley said Victoria was “10 per cent ahead of the national Indigenous rates, but around 20 per cent behind the rest of the community”. “That is not good enough,” he said.

The new campaign follows last month's launch of four dedicated vaccine vans to provide outreach services to communities around the state. The vans operate in Melbourne and in the northwest, southwest and east of the state and provide at-risk community members with the ability to be vaccinated at home.