



Australian Government

Department of Health

Dear allied health professionals

I am writing to update you on the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Australia and internationally and to outline the Commonwealth's current and future support for the central role you are playing in our national response.

Allied health professionals are fundamental in meeting community needs in this evolving and complex challenge. We need to look at ways to continue the essential services you provide for vulnerable people. I thank you for your efforts so far in helping to contain the spread of this disease, and the well-being of your clients, and encourage you to maintain your vigilance in seeking to prevent its further transmission. Infections are increasing across Australia, placing a significant burden on the health and aged care systems.

Communication

A significant amount of advice and information has already been provided to health professionals. I recognise the evolving nature of this outbreak has required public health advice to move rapidly with the emerging epidemiology. This has made it more challenging for people to keep up to date, causing some confusion and a perception of inconsistent information and information gaps.

As you are hopefully aware, a broad community education campaign on COVID-19 has been underway for over a week now. One of the important messages of the campaign is the value of basic standard hygiene messages (hand washing, cough etiquette, social distancing) in preventing transmission. Allied health professionals are highly trusted professionals in our community, and it is important you play a role in communicating this message to your patients, family and friends, along with general balanced information about this virus. The campaign resources for the general community are available at:

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources>

Situation as at 25 March 2020

As you are aware, the international situation has changed significantly in the past few weeks. Cases have now been reported in more than 196 countries, some with sustained widespread community transmission. In Australia, we have cases identified in every state and territory, and a growing number every day.

Disease characteristics

It is clear the great majority of people with COVID-19 infection (more than 80 per cent) have mild disease, not requiring any specific health intervention. However, this contributes to the high transmissibility of the virus, as many people with infection will continue working and interacting with the community because their symptoms are so mild.

There is very little evidence of significant COVID-19 disease in children. Initially, it was suggested children were less susceptible to infection but more recent evidence supports the fact that children may be infected, in many cases without being aware of symptoms.

Current approach to response

Our response is being guided by the [Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for COVID-19 \(the Plan\)](http://www.health.gov.au/Covid19-plan) (www.health.gov.au/Covid19-plan). A key goal of the Plan is to outline a decision making process to achieve a response that is proportionate to the level of risk, acknowledging the risk is not the same across population groups. A response that is appropriate to the impact the coronavirus outbreak is likely to have on the community, and on vulnerable populations within the community, will make the best use of the resources available and minimise social disruption.

Reducing exposure in health care settings

With increasing cases of COVID-19, it is important to prevent the co-mingling of suspect or proven cases with other patients in health care settings. We have previously advised members of the community that, if they believe they have been exposed to, or have, COVID-19, they should phone their GP or local health service and seek advice before attending.

The COVID-19 national hotline (1800 020 080) has now been expanded to support general practices to manage the flow of cases. This hotline is operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week. People who believe they may have been exposed to, or have, COVID-19 are encouraged to initially call the national hotline, rather than their GP or local health service, to seek advice.

Personal Protective Equipment

All the evidence currently suggests droplet spread is the main mode of transmission and that surgical masks are adequate (and much easier to fit) than P2 masks if you are in close contact with patients. There is a global shortage of masks. The highest priority of the Government is to ensure access to masks and other PPE for front line acute health service and primary care staff. This includes:

- public hospitals (supporting the states and territories), general practices, community pharmacies, and other settings where people are most likely to be presenting with COVID-19
- residential aged care facilities in the event of an outbreak

Access to masks is being kept under review as more stocks become available and if risks increase. If and when more became available, they will be prioritised first to those allied health professionals whose work entails close physical contact with their patients and only when the intervention is strictly necessary and urgent.

Telehealth

The Australian Government has expanded access to telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic for some health services. There is expected to be more changes soon to telehealth access. The following link provides more details on the current new arrangements. I suggest you revisit this page regularly for updates.

<http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/news-2020-03-01-latest-news-March>

Gyms used for clinical treatment

While there has been a decision taken by National Cabinet to close gyms catering to the general public, small gyms used for clinical treatment can remain open as long as they meet the general social distancing requirements, namely, space for social distancing of four square metres per person and not more than 10 people attending at the same time.

The Department of Health has recently released a learning module on infection control. I encourage you to complete this. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/how-to-protect-yourself-and-the-people-you-are-caring-for-from-infection-with-covid-19>

Other resources for health professionals and aged care workers are updated regularly at: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-the-health-and-aged-care-sector>

No one can accurately predict how the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to develop in Australia. Our collective response has to be flexible and collaborative. The Australian Government has committed to provide the necessary resources to support the response in whatever form it needs to take.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Studdert', written over a faint circular stamp.

Dr Lisa Studdert
Deputy Secretary
Australian Government Department of Health

26 March 2020