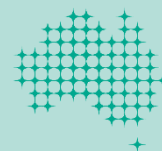


# AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL SCIENCES STATEMENT ON COVID-19



**20 MARCH 2020**

Australian  
Academy of Health and  
Medical Sciences

The world is facing an extraordinary challenge as the burden of COVID-19 rises. Fellows of the Academy with world-leading expertise in relevant areas are assisting us in monitoring the outbreak and are liaising with the Chief Medical Officer and others as they work to manage it effectively.

The coronavirus pandemic is a rapidly evolving situation. Coronaviruses have been studied for at least 40 years and outbreaks of SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012 have provided us with insights into how serious these infections can be. Although there has been an explosion of knowledge in relation to COVID-19 over the last 12 weeks, there remain uncertainties, unknowns and answers that are only just emerging. It is crucial at such times that governments consult experts who are able to help interpret and analyse this challenging landscape and support the development of appropriate policies and approaches. The Academy welcomes the efforts of Australian governments to date to consult with experts, including our Fellows, as it navigates these exceptional circumstances. We urge them to continue to consult widely as we enter the most challenging period yet for managing COVID-19 in Australia, which is likely to require more robust policy measures, potentially including more stringent social distancing requirements.

The Federal Government, working with the states and territories, has prioritised the need to slow the spread of the disease. The decisions on how to do this are not easy, with potentially grave consequences if there is an increase in community transmission. The Government has recommended extensive testing and isolation of cases with some social distancing measures. Other countries have opted for more extreme measures including complete lock down of cities and countries as we have seen in China and across Europe. These are difficult decisions with significant health and economic consequences if we do not get them right.

As individuals, we all have a role to play in supporting effective management of this outbreak – it is critical that governments, health services and the wider Australian community all act appropriately and responsibly. This is only possible if there is effective communication and transparency about the decisions being made. Governments must take the time to explain the reasons behind the measures being introduced and we believe a more concerted effort is required here. We welcome the recently introduced public health campaign, but the impacts of COVID-19 will be extensive, with implications far beyond the immediate health effects. It is therefore crucial that the Government explains why the policies and approaches used are deemed necessary, in the context of these far-reaching consequences. Furthermore, even the most justifiable policies can have knock-on health effects, for example the negative mental health impacts of quarantine – such outcomes should be considered and mitigated as policies are introduced.

This need for transparency and clarity also applies to health services – clear guidelines around testing are required, and must be followed, to ensure that we retain testing kits for the right cases and that services and laboratories are able to cope with the rapidly increasing demand. It is possible that broader testing will be needed and this means new approaches or technologies will be required. Likewise, these approaches must be accompanied by urgent plans for the delivery of health services to those who need them most as we head towards peak case load. A lack of clarity on these preparations is causing anxiety within the community and this must be addressed. Australia will

need to provide treatment to those who experience the more severe symptoms of COVID-19, which will include vulnerable communities such as the elderly, Indigenous Australians and individuals with underlying conditions.

We are encouraged by efforts to ensure that scientific evidence has informed approaches to this outbreak from the outset in Australia, including by supporting work to isolate and share the virus, funding vaccine development, and introducing widely available testing in mid-January – ahead of many other developed nations.

The Academy is looking to develop a research and infrastructure investment framework designed to minimise the impact of this and future epidemics, in alignment with the ‘Epidemic Preparedness’ item in the current Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) research strategy and the listed MRFF Priorities; potentially including vaccine development and manufacture, infectious agent diagnostics, novel therapeutics, and health care provision strategies.

Even greater challenges lie ahead and the Government needs to ensure that our response is decisive and evidence-based to achieve the best outcomes for all Australians.