



Australian Government

Department of Health

Chief Medical Officer

Associate Professor Seng Chua and Dr Xiufang Liu
Chair and President
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Dear Associate Professor Chua and Dr Liu

I refer to your correspondence of 3 January 2022 concerning prioritised COVID-19 testing for vulnerable groups. I apologise for the delay in my response.

The testing strategy for the national COVID-19 response continues to be a key priority, particularly as restrictions continue to ease in accordance with the National Plan to Transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Australian Government has provided \$8.3 billion through the National Partnership on COVID-19 Response (the Partnership) to support state and territory health systems in responding to COVID-19 outbreaks. Under the Partnership, all persons in Australia can receive a COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or rapid antigen test (RAT) provided in state and territory clinics free of charge, regardless of Medicare eligibility.

Through the Partnership, the Australian Government will contribute 50 per cent to the cost of COVID-19 PCR and RAT testing. To date, the Partnership has provided over \$414 million in direct funding to COVID-19 PCR testing delivered by state and territory clinics, and has also directly contributed to the procurement of RATs by state and territories.

The Government has also funded over 30 million COVID-19 PCR tests through Medicare at a cost of over \$2.4 billion. Under Medicare legislation, tests are required to be clinically relevant, that is, requested by a medical practitioner or nurse practitioner for the clinical management of their private patient.

On 3 December 2021, the Government announced additional funding of \$540 million to support the ongoing health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including an extension of temporary Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items for COVID-19 PCR testing and substantial funding for in-reach COVID-19 PCR testing in the aged care sector for residents and staff until 30 June 2022.

Complementing the Government's support for COVID-19 testing, a further \$24 million to support temporary changes to Medicare in response to the Omicron variant was announced on 16 January 2022. This funding supports a range of temporary specialist telehealth items that were due to cease on 31 December 2021, along with longer GP telephone consultations and support to provide face-to-face care to patients with COVID-19 in the community. These measures have already been implemented, backdated to 1 January 2022, and will continue until 30 June 2022.

On 10 February 2022, the Prime Minister announced that a Winter National COVID and Influenza Preparedness report would be presented to National Cabinet to assess Australia's capability in responding to respiratory illnesses in the coming winter months, including testing capacity for both COVID-19 and other respiratory pathogens including influenza.

I note the proposals outlined in your letter and thank you for your suggestions. I will continue to consider all options concerning COVID-19 testing strategies in my advice to Government.

Thank you for writing on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PKelly', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Professor Paul Kelly
Chief Medical Officer
7 March 2022