

Submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Dear COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel,

I am writing to submit my insights as a General Practitioner based in Melbourne, actively engaged on the frontline during the early stages (and ongoing) COVID-19 pandemic. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry and share my firsthand experiences to aid in the improvement of Australia's preparedness for future pandemics.

Introduction:

I am a GP with a commitment to delivering quality care and ensuring the safety of both patients and practice staff. My involvement in the day-to-day challenges posed by the pandemic has provided me with a distinctive perspective on various frontline issues, ranging from the provision of care to COVID-19 patients to the continuity of care for all other patients and active participation in the vaccination process.

Key reflections:

1. Lack of Consistency in Clinical Advice

The absence of a centrally governed Centre for Disease Control in Australia has notably resulted in challenges related to the consistency of clinical advice, largely due to the decentralised nature of decision-making across states and territories. This decentralised model has introduced complexities in offering unified and streamlined guidance, impacting healthcare staff and patients alike. From a practical standpoint, the fragmentation in decision-making has led to variations in public health measures, testing and isolation protocols and treatment recommendations, creating confusion among both healthcare professionals and the public.

In addressing these challenges, the proposal for establishing an Australian Centre for Disease Control emerges as not only commendable but also imperative. A centrally governed CDC would provide a unified framework for decision-making, fostering consistency in clinical advice, public health strategies, and emergency responses. This centralised approach would significantly enhance the coordination and efficiency of information dissemination, ensuring that healthcare providers, public health agencies, and the general public receive clear evidence-based guidance promptly.

From a clinical perspective, having a centralised body dedicated to disease control would streamline data collection, analysis, and dissemination, allowing for real-time adjustments in response strategies. This not only contributes to a more agile and effective public health system but also instils confidence in healthcare professionals and the public by presenting a coherent and coordinated front in the face of health crises. The proposed Australian Centre for Disease Control is a proactive step towards fortifying the nation's resilience in managing health emergencies, embodying a commitment to evidence-based, consistent and well-coordinated healthcare practices.

2. Balancing Act within General Practice: Navigating the Dual Challenge of Chronic Care and Respiratory Symptoms in the Era of COVID-19

Balancing the care of patients with chronic health conditions alongside the management of individuals presenting with respiratory symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 presented a significant challenge in general practice. The need to provide ongoing care for those with chronic illnesses requires meticulous attention to their specific health needs, treatment plans, and regular check-ups. Simultaneously, the identification and appropriate management of potential COVID-19 cases demand a different set of precautions, including isolation measures, testing, and referral for further assessment. This dual responsibility not only strains the resources and logistics of the practice but also requires constant adaptation to evolving guidelines and protocols. The challenge lies in mitigating the risks of potential COVID-19 transmission within the practice environment while ensuring that the continuity of care for patients with chronic conditions remains uninterrupted. This delicate balance demands a nuanced and dynamic approach, emphasising the importance of robust infection control measures and clear communication to provide comprehensive and safe healthcare services to all patients.

3. Operational Challenges: Ensuring Effective Communication and Comprehensive Care in General Practice

One of the formidable challenges encountered on the frontline involves the intricate task of disseminating crucial COVID-19 related decisions within primary care. This challenge is particularly pronounced when managing patients with respiratory symptoms. Navigating this delicate balance demands a multifaceted approach to healthcare delivery. It encompasses not only the imperative to prevent Emergency Departments from being inundated by individuals with severe injuries and diseases but also the preservation of general practices for routine functions. This encompasses a broad spectrum of services, ranging from chronic disease management, acute injury care, cancer treatment, pregnancy care, and mental health support to immunisations and various screening procedures – while dealing with a pandemic.

4. Navigating Challenges: Critical Evaluation of GP Respiratory Clinics

One significant area of concern revolves around the hasty establishment of GP respiratory clinics by the COVID-19 Primary Care Response team of the Australian Government Department of Health. While these clinics were ostensibly created to address the escalating respiratory challenges posed by the virus, my on-the-ground experience reveals glaring inadequacies in their setup and functionality.

The shortcomings of the respiratory clinics have manifested in instances where patients, requiring more than a routine COVID-19 test, were inadequately assessed, leading to subsequent complications and avoidable visits to emergency departments. This breakdown in the referral process not only jeopardised patient care but also erodes the trust that clinicians place in these designated clinics.

5. Unsung Heroes: Recognising the Vital Role of Medical Reception Staff and Practice Nurses.

Amidst the challenges of the pandemic, it is crucial to shine a spotlight on the unsung heroes within our healthcare system, namely GP practice nurses and medical reception staff. These dedicated individuals serve as the backbone of medical practices, play instrumental roles in ensuring the smooth operation of healthcare services. Practice nurses, with their diverse skill sets, make substantial contributions to patient care, encompassing tasks such as administering vaccinations, managing chronic disease clinics, and actively participating in COVID-19 testing and vaccination initiatives. Simultaneously, the medical reception staff, serving as the initial point of contact for patients, undertake critical responsibilities including appointment management, implementing meticulous screening processes, and managing patient flow, especially in the face of the current challenging times. Their unwavering dedication, resilience, and commitment to the well-being of patients are indispensable components of our healthcare system. It is imperative to recognise and acknowledge these unsung heroes for their tireless efforts, as they continue to work diligently to ensure the seamless functioning of medical practices and make substantial contributions to our collective efforts against the myriad of challenges posed by health crises.

6. Personal Experience

On a personal note, my [REDACTED] cousin's untimely passing due to COVID-19 in the [REDACTED] during the early stages of the pandemic has reinforced the importance of a prompt, decisive, and strong public health response. Integrating lessons learned from both local and international experiences is vital for shaping effective national response strategies. This tragic experience has fuelled my commitment to ensuring that Australia's response strategies are informed by the lessons learned from both local and international contexts. In the dual role of a frontline GP and an individual intimately acquainted with the repercussions of the virus, I stand poised to contribute a unique and valuable perspective to any inquiry. My submission serves as a testament to my clinical leadership, offering insights and recommendations garnered from the front lines of the battle against COVID-19.

7. Reflections on Resilience: Gratitude, Empathy, and Global Realities Amidst the Pandemic

In expressing gratitude for the unwavering efforts of our healthcare heroes, it's crucial to extend recognition to Australian authorities, particularly the state-based political leadership, for their collaborative actions in curbing the impact of COVID-19-related deaths in the country. Setting aside political differences, acknowledging the success in managing the pandemic is an overdue testament to the shared commitment to public health.

Reflecting on the challenges of lockdowns that occurred three years ago, it's poignant to consider the profound blessing of the presence of close family and friends who weathered those dark days alongside us. The collective memories of lockdown horror stories, isolation, and uncertainty are etched in our minds, underscoring the resilience and solidarity of our communities. Today, standing alongside our loved ones, hearing their voices, witnessing their smiles and feeling their comforting presence, we recognise the invaluable nature of these connections.

However, against this backdrop of gratitude, it is essential to confront the stark reality revealed by the World Health Organisation's true excess mortality figures. This serves as a poignant reminder of the global disparities in pandemic impact. While we count our blessings, it is crucial to extend empathy to the millions of shattered families worldwide, whose stories remain untold. Behind each statistic lies a name, a face, a story, emphasising the profound fragility of life.

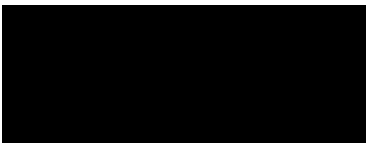
In embracing our gratitude for the presence of our dear ones, there's a simultaneous call for empathy towards those who can no longer share their stories, dreams, and laughter. It serves as a stark reminder of life's fragility and the imperative to cherish each moment with those we hold dear. As we move forward, let these reflections guide us in fostering resilience, solidarity and a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of our global community.


Conclusion:

My unique perspective as a frontline GP and someone who has intimately felt the impact of the virus positions me to offer valuable insights to the Inquiry's discussions. I am committed to actively participating in shaping recommendations that enhance Australia's response to future pandemics, drawing upon my clinical leadership and dedication to improving patient outcomes.

I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this crucial inquiry and look forward to further engagement in the next stages of targeted stakeholder involvement.

Sincerely,



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