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National Quarantine Review

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AMA Submission to the Further Review of Quarantine Arrangements

Thank you for inviting the AMA to provide input into the further review of quarantine arrangements.

The AMA remains concerned by the lack of progress on ensuring Australia's quarantine system is fit for purpose and that there is no apparent plan to transition away from the use of hotels as we open international borders and require dedicated facilities to deal with arrivals from 'high risk' locations. With potentially 34 breaches in the quarantine system¹ and breaches directly resulting in Australia's second and third waves, ensuring Australia's first line of defense against COVID-19 is genuinely fit for purpose remains an urgent priority.

In the short term, the current quarantine system must have two simple goals: to prevent COVID-19 originating overseas from spreading through Australia, and to ensure that Australians can continue to return here from overseas, ideally in increased numbers. Given the extent of breaches around the country, hotel quarantine arrangements are still not sufficiently robust and that jurisdictions continue to take different approaches and resist the adoption of a nationally consistent model.

From next year, as Australia gradually opens to international travel, the focus of quarantine will change. Increasingly, home quarantine will need to be used for low risk travelers with more robust arrangements targeting the management of individuals that present greater risk. In this context, hotel quarantine will no longer be a viable option. Hotels are not built for the latter purpose and will necessarily need to return to normal operations as tourism recovers.

The AMA's main concerns and recommendations are outlined below.

Purpose built quarantine facilities

The AMA has been frustrated by the slow pace at which we have transitioned away from hotel quarantine to using purpose-built quarantine facilities for people arriving in Australia from overseas. We called publicly on many occasions earlier in 2021 for quicker, stronger

¹ COVID Live. 'COVID Live Quarantine Breaches', covidlive.com.au <accessed 26 August 2021>.

action to strengthen our quarantine system.² We have seen examples infection control guidelines not being appropriately enforced during transport of returning travelers, by quarantine staff, and we have seen many of the more recent breaches occur as a result of transmission between people in quarantine.

While we are pleased to note the contracts recently signed to build quarantine facilities at the Pinkenba near the Brisbane airport, at Bullsbrock near Perth, and at Wellcamp airport near Toowoomba, these projects will take months to complete.

Hotel quarantine was only supposed to be a temporary measure, and we supported it as such. However as the First Halton Review demonstrated, “the hotel quarantine “system is vulnerable to breaches and these are hard to eliminate.”

The AMA acknowledges that even once these purpose built facilities are functioning, the capacity across Howard Springs (2,000), Pinkenba (1,000), Bullsbrock (1,000) and Wellcamp (1,000) will be only 5,000 people. Given that these people will have to quarantine for two weeks, and that Australia will eventually need to return to an arrivals cap of just over 6,000 people per week, this is well short of the required capacity.

Australia also needs to be preparing for the next variant of concern. We have seen first the Alpha variant and now the Delta variant rapidly become the dominant strains, revealing the weak spots in our protections. We need to be prepared for another more severe variant to emerge overseas. This means not only having purpose built quarantine facilities, but the capacity to scale up these facilities if required, or to bring secondary sites online.

As such, the AMA recommends that this review:

- Undertake a stocktake of existing facilities (outside of hotel quarantine) that could be repurposed and used to quarantine incoming arrivals, particularly those from higher risk countries or those that are repatriated as part of an emergency response;
- Put in place arrangements to fast track the approval of any existing proposals for dedicated quarantine facilities for COVID-19 that are assessed as being suitable;
- Review the options of using home quarantine for fully vaccinated people arriving in Australia, noting the protections that must be considered in transport and the community;

Ensuring hotel quarantine is fit for purpose

The AMA’s major concerns with hotel quarantine are well documented. To ensure that our quarantine system is as robust as possible, the following best practice measures must be adopted nationally:

Improved ventilation

It is now accepted that airborne transmission COVID-19 occurs and is a risk which must be mitigated. The Delta variant has amplified this risk. As such, best practice in hotels where people are quarantining must be observed. While it is unlikely that hotels will be able to generate negative pressure rooms for those in quarantine, they can all have portable air

² For example see: [Hotel quarantine failures show need for action](#); and [COVID-19 and future quarantine arrangements - Federal Council Communique](#).

cleaners with HEPA filters.³ The referenced study demonstrated that two small domestic air cleaners could clear 99 per cent of potentially infectious aerosols within five and a half minutes.

Strengthened Personal Protective Equipment

The AMA is satisfied with the national current infection prevention and control guidelines, specifically PPE requirements. All staff working in hotel quarantine must be provided with the right level of PPE, fit testing must be provided, and the application of the guidelines must be enforced through audits. The AMA has been dissatisfied by the frequent reports of quarantine staff with inadequate PPE or not properly using their PPE.

Mandating vaccinations

The AMA supports mandating vaccines for all quarantine staff. We acknowledge that all quarantine staff must be supported to be vaccinated by paying the staff for the time it takes to be vaccinated.

General comment

As we move closer to our vaccination targets and transitioning from a virus elimination strategy to coexisting with the virus, we must ensure that systemic arrangements are in place to ensure that infection numbers remain low and do not put further pressure on an already stretched hospital system. Effective quarantine forms a key component of this.

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³ Busing, K., Schofield, R., Irving, L., Keywood, M., Stevens, A., Keogh, N., . . . Marshall, C. (2021). Use of portable air cleaners to reduce aerosol transmission on a hospital coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) ward. *Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology*, 1-6. doi:10.1017/ice.2021.284