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**Keep emergency departments just for emergencies over Christmas break**

The AMA is urging people to stay safe over the Christmas New Year period, the peak pressure time for Australia’s public hospitals, which are already in logjam.

AMA President Professor Steve Robson said public hospitals are still in logjam, with overcrowded EDs, full beds, and staffing shortages made worse because doctors and healthcare workers are now isolating with COVID-19.

“We’re heading into a perfect storm over Christmas where COVID-19 cases from the peak of the 4th wave will enter hospitals, coupled with the usual holiday accidents, alcohol-related incidents and toy-related injuries, and our EDs will be in for a very rough time,” Professor Robson said.

“Spare a thought for our dedicated, but burnt-out healthcare workers who will be looking after your family members rather than spending Christmas with theirs, we don’t want to make their job any harder than it has to be.

“Of course, you should come to the ED for medical emergencies, but to help relieve pressure on our EDs over summer, the AMA is recommending people stay safe and keep a mask handy to use on public transport, in aged care settings and around vulnerable people.

“We’re seeing most people in the community not bothering with good hand hygiene, social distancing or mask-wearing. COVID-19 is still very serious for many vulnerable, elderly and immuno-compromised people and these people deserve our consideration, so for example if you are going into a nursing home to visit your grandmother, you should be wearing a mask.

“What we need to try to do is avoid getting sick enough that people need to go to hospital, so we avoid that extra pressure right at the peak period. So do the right thing if you are in enclosed spaces and have your Christmas gatherings outdoors if possible. Also, stay home if you feel sick or unwell and self-isolate if you contract COVID-19 until you’re no longer symptomatic.”

Professor Robson said the best way people could protect themselves and their loved ones was to make sure they were up to date with vaccines, including boosters which lower the chance of getting COVID-19 and reduce the severity of illness if people do contract COVID-19.

“People should also check their general practice’s opening hours over the Christmas break and remember that most practices have arrangements in place with medical deputising services so that people can access urgent GP care outside of normal business hours, helping keep hospital EDs just for emergencies,” Professor Robson said.

CONTACT:  AMA Media: +61 427 209 753 media@ama.com.au

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