

Select Committee on COVID-19: Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Terms of Reference

The George Institute will focus on the following terms of reference:

- A. the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- B. any related matters.

About The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute is a leading independent global medical research institute established and headquartered in Sydney. It has major centres in China, India and the UK, and an international network of experts and collaborators.

Our mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by using innovative approaches to prevent and treat the world's biggest killers: non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and injury.

Our work aims to generate effective, evidence-based and affordable solutions to the world's biggest health challenges. We research the chronic and critical conditions that cause the greatest loss of life and quality of life, and the most substantial economic burden, particularly in resource poor settings.

About this Submission

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government has made key decisions that directly impact the economy and the daily lives of every Australian. The purpose of these decisions has been to slow the rate of infection, otherwise known as to “flatten the curve”, and ensure the health system continues to operate efficiently and effectively, especially if presented with large numbers of infected patients. To date, this has resulted in Australia having one of the highest testing rates and lowest confirmed cases and deaths in the world, per capita.

The George Institute believes the Australian Government’s long-term investment in health and medical research has helped Australia effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes ongoing support for the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and establishing the \$20 billion Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). In the post pandemic recovery, further government support and investment in health and medical research will ensure Australia remains innovative and competitive.

Like most businesses and not-for-profit organisations, The George Institute has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a global medical research institute, we are continuing our work to improve the health of millions of people worldwide. There is much work ahead to better understand the long-term health implications from patients with COVID-19, particularly those who have co-morbidities and non-communicable diseases.

The George Institute welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19. There are seven key recommendations related to the Australian Government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and related matters, including the importance of investing in medical research and targeting non-communicable diseases.

Key Recommendations

The George Institute for Global Health recommends the Australian Government consider:

- 1) A national review of the National Cabinet to assess whether such a structure can exist post pandemic.
- 2) A national review into the COVIDSafe App to assess whether it was effective in carrying out its purpose, and if it should continue to exist, ready for any future pandemics.
- 3) Increase financial support to medical research in Australia, including projects like The George Institute’s ‘National Research Register’.
- 4) Financial support for universities and researchers in the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post pandemic recovery.
- 5) Increase financial support for the World Health Organization (WHO), in particular support for the WHO NCD/WIN Working Group on COVID-19 and non-communicable diseases.
- 6) Increase financial support and programs to reduce non-communicable diseases.
- 7) Broaden the scope of the National Preventive Health Strategy to include a whole of system plan in tackling NCDs and/or devising a National Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention Action Plan with a whole of system, intergenerational approach.

A. The Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The George Institute for Global Health commends the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This specifically includes:

- **Establishment of the National Cabinet:** The George Institute strongly supports the establishment of the National Cabinet on 13 March 2020, comprising the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers. Its structure and status, equivalent to the Australian Government's Cabinet, has allowed important discussion and decision making to occur effectively and efficiently. It has created more bipartisanship between Australian governments and the major political parties. This is particularly important to health and medical research.

Recommendation: A national review of the National Cabinet to assess whether such a structure can exist post pandemic.

- **The COVIDSafe app - slowing the spread:** The George Institute strongly commends the Department of Health for developing and promoting the COVIDSafe app. We encourage all Australians with a mobile phone to download the app to assist state and territory health officials monitor people who have had close contact with COVID-19 infected people. Its purpose is to ultimately slow the spread of COVID-19, as well as allow state and territory health officials to easily and quickly contact people who have been in close contact with other people infected with COVID-19.

Recommendation: A national review into the COVIDSafe App to assess whether it was effective in carrying out its purpose, and if it should continue to exist ready for any future pandemics.

- **Australian Government funding for World Health Organization (WHO):** The George Institute supports Australian Government funding to the WHO of \$53 million per annum. We support the Prime Minister confirming Australian Government funding on 22 April 2020, despite the United States defunding the WHO in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe this defunding will have global consequences. The George Institute notes the important work of the WHO NCD/WIN Working Group on COVID-19 and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and its efforts to "Strengthen the design and implementation of policies, including for resilient health systems and health services and infrastructure, to treat people living with NCDs and prevent and control their risk factors during the COVID-19 outbreak".

Recommendation: Increase financial support for the World Health Organization (WHO), in particular support for the WHO NCD/WIN Working Group on COVID-19 and non-communicable diseases.

- **Job Keeper Payment - keep Australians working:** The George Institute supports the economic actions the Australian Government has undertaken in relation to the Job Keeper Payment, a temporary subsidy for businesses and not-for-profit organisations significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The George Institute has qualified to receive the Job Keeper Payment, which has ensured our staff continue to work. Without the Job Keeper Payment, hard financial decisions would have been required. When social isolation is lifted there will be many businesses and not-for-profit organisations, including The George Institute, that will return to work at a quicker rate because staff were able to be kept employed.

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples:** Particular ongoing considerations must be made to address the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who are inequitably affected by COVID-19. It is essential that communities are engaged, and knowledges adopted, in the management of any risks and outbreaks. Culturally safe programs and health protocols should be developed in consultation with community leaders and healthcare professionals.
- **Mental health and wellbeing in the COVID-19 pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many people's mental health and wellbeing, whether due to financial and employment related stress or loneliness from social isolation. The George Institute commends the Australian Government for expanding critical mental health and wellbeing phone and online support services. This includes the \$48.1 million to support the 'National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan' released on 15 May 2020, building on the approximately \$500 million for additional mental health services and support since 30 January 2020. The George Institute further commends the Australian Government for appointing Dr Ruth Vine, Australia's first Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Mental Health.
- **Medical Research Future Fund:** The George Institute commends the Australian Government for establishing the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) in 2014. Due to MRFF \$20 billion investment, and the ongoing support for the NHMRC, the Australian Government has been in an advantageous position to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The George Institute notes the MRFF is supporting world-leading research into the latest COVID-19 treatments. This includes a dedicated round of the MRFF's Biomedical Translation Bridge, an additional \$20 million for research into mental health and suicide prevention, and providing funding for researchers to develop treatments for COVID-19.

While The George Institute for Global Health commends the Australian Government's efforts to deal with this global pandemic, we believe more can be done to:

- **Financially support our universities and researchers:** The George Institute acknowledges and supports the contribution universities and researchers make, both to health and medical research, and to the economy, in Australia. In 2016-17, the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) calculated there were over 164,000 full time equivalents in the research workforce in Australia. Currently, universities and researchers are working to seek solutions to the problems both directly and indirectly related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including developing intellectual property that can be commercialised, and in-turn open economic opportunities. Like most businesses and not-for-profit organisations, universities have been financially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly due to the lost revenue from international students. Unfortunately, most universities do not qualify for the Job Keeper Payment, despite [Universities Australia](#) estimating approximately 21,000 jobs are at risk in the next six months. In the time of a global pandemic, it is essential now more than ever to fund universities and researchers to continue their work, as well as ensuring an ongoing pipeline of new research is funded.

Recommendation: Financial support for universities and researchers in the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post pandemic recovery.

B. Any related matters

- **Investment in medical research:** There are obvious health benefits to investing in medical research. But there are equally economic benefits. In 2018, [KPMG Australia](#) calculated that for every \$1 invested in medical research, \$3.90 is returned to the broader economy. If the Australian Government considers a post pandemic economic recovery package, we believe medical research is a sensible investment. Currently, many medical research institutes are working on life saving projects. The George Institute is currently developing an online 'National Research Register' to be used quickly and easily to engage and mobilise Australians in the research process. It is based on a proven and successful model developed and used in Scotland, called [SHARE](#). The research register will:
 - Encourage Australians 18 years and over to become involved in research by signing up and being contacted about projects relevant to them. It takes only a few minutes to join.
 - Support Australian researchers to directly contact participants, and easily use routinely collected data.
 - Cut red tape by removing the major barrier to the recruitment of participants, as participation is usually negotiated via third parties with competing priorities.
 - Enhance opportunity and investment for research in Australia, as international investors will recognise the recruitment efficiencies provided by the register.
 - Save lives by supporting earlier and more efficient research breakthroughs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous goodwill in the community as they observe the vital work of healthcare professionals and researchers. The establishment of a research register will harness this goodwill to save lives.

Recommendation: Increase financial support to medical research in Australia, including projects like The George Institute's 'National Research Register'.

- **Tackling NCDs to enhance resilience:** In 2011, [90 per cent of all deaths](#) in Australia were from NCDs. This includes diabetes, heart disease and stroke, kidney disease and respiratory diseases. Current evidence demonstrates pre-existing conditions, including NCDs, are resulting in patients experiencing higher severity of COVID-19 symptoms, as well as increased risk of death. It is crucial that the federal, state and territory governments recognise that a reduction in NCDs will enhance resilience against pandemics, like COVID-19.

Recommendation: Increase financial support and programs to reduce NCDs and embed NCD management in all national health strategies and action plans.

- **Prevention beyond a vaccine:** In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, people often think of prevention as the development of a vaccine and its wide-scale roll out around the world. While this is a crucial element to global recovery, it is not the only aspect of health care for governments to consider. In Australia, prevention means ensuring the highest level of population health possible, which should include a reduction in the burden of NCDs.

Recommendation: Broaden the scope of the National Preventive Health Strategy to include a whole of system plan in tackling NCDs and/or devising a National Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention Action Plan with a whole of system, intergenerational approach.

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