

COTA SA STATEMENT ABOUT COVID-19

Background

This statement is issued following questions to COTA SA about our position in relation to COVID-19 given the particular impact for older South Australians.

Responding effectively and comprehensively to COVID-19 is at the top of the list of priorities for 2021 identified by COTA SA including through its Policy Council made up of diverse older South Australians.

COVID-19 threatens the health and well-being of all Australians. Beyond that it also has the potential to threaten notions of fairness, equality, financial well-being and social cohesion.

COTA SA advocates for a diverse community of more than 630,000 older South Australians to find opportunities for purpose, engagement, connection, creativity, contribution and independence.

We need leadership and a longer-term plan

We need as soon as possible, a national, and State, plan not only for resisting the community transmission of COVID-19 but for living with it.

Notwithstanding the outstanding contributions to date of public health, emergency and scientific leaders and thousands of frontline workers, COTA SA believes that governments need to produce a roadmap with directions, timeframes and pre-conditions for opening up and for the future management of the pandemic.

There is an unreality about the present position taken in Australia, and South Australia, to avoid global engagement in the longer term. The lack of urgency in planning for opening up the national borders is having knock-on effects including extreme caution about vaccination.

Any leadership vacuum will be filled by a multitude of voices including from those industries that we remain devastated by global restrictions – tourism, hospitality, international education, agriculture and horticulture. At some point a date will be set for opening our borders beyond “travel bubbles”. To do this, we need to know how we will manage the COVID-19 outbreaks that will occur. Lockdowns are very unlikely to be an effective or practical strategy in the long-term.

We need investment in quarantine facilities

We need long-term planning for, or investment in, facilities and systems to “live with” COVID-19.

Central to a long-term plan must be the establishment of large-scale, purpose-built, humane and effective quarantine facilities to cater safely for Australian citizens and permanent residents seeking repatriation, international travelers, overseas students and skilled migrant workers. Dedicated facilities will need to be in all states and of a scale to

handle large numbers of people including in the case of future outbreaks. Experts advise that such facilities would provide maximum protection for the Australian population. Facilities of this kind have existed in South Australia in the past and are needed now and for the future.

We need urgency and better communication for vaccination

COTA SA supports the view that widespread vaccination is both urgent and essential. If the vaccination program continues to be slow and fragmented, the confidence in its efficacy, safety, reliability and fairness will continue to be undermined.

We urge that attention is paid to –

- Rapidly increasing the rate of vaccine roll-out.
- Completing the task of ensuring front-line aged care staff have targeted and easy opportunities to be vaccinated.
- Enabling and assisting all people receiving aged care to receive vaccination against COVID-19 as a matter of urgency.
- Reversing the very slow response to vaccinate people previously identified as high priority and classified as 1a or 1b.
- Ensuring that GPs, if they are to be central to the roll-out strategy, have adequate supplies, are part of communications and use consistent protocols.
- Communicating effectively about the rationale for the decision to use age 50 as the marker about whether people access AstraZeneca or Pfizer.
- Tackling the perception that putting off their vaccination is low risk because opening up our borders is not imminent and occasional infections are under control.
- Addressing the adverse and disproportionate publicity on vaccine risks.

We need to treat all people fairly and equitably

We are alarmed about the social judgements and inequitable treatment relating to Australian citizens currently residing overseas and seeking to return and to migrants and temporary visa holders in Australia.

We recognise the reality of the lives of Australians whose families are separated across continents and who need to care for kin across countries – whether from Australia to other countries or into Australia from another country – as a reality for many modern families and particularly affecting older people.

We are alarmed too that many of those separated from family will be experiencing extreme stress and social isolation in circumstances very poorly understood by others. We expect our leadership to be standing beside those Australians and placing a priority on their plight.

We are aware that aged care relies heavily upon a workforce of temporary visa holders and international students. The recent federal announcements about new aged care places and improved staff levels are welcome but depend on the availability of a skilled workforce and are at risk for as long as our borders remain closed.

We need effective communication

Fragmented communication from governments will mean that older South Australians – indeed all South Australians – will be left trying to make the best of inadequate or confused and contradictory information to assess personal risks, understand vaccination, or comprehend the plan for managing COVID-19 in Australia.

We need to consider and respond to the long-term effects

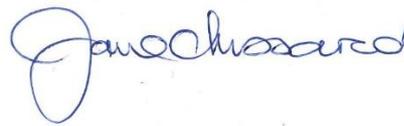
Older South Australians are at particular risk from COVID-19. They are more likely to contract COVID-19, more likely to experience very serious symptoms and are being adversely affected by the isolation that is associated with lockdowns including in aged care. Older South Australians too have already lost, or will lose, employment with the likelihood of never working again.

COTA SA represents 633,000 older South Australians who will continue to provide essential childcare and fulfil roles as family caregivers contributing to the informal economy. Many (and disproportionately older women) are again at risk of being taken for granted in terms of the loss of work and growing risks of homelessness.

We urge a long term, comprehensive strategy across governments that addresses these issues.



Emeritus Professor Anne Edwards AO
President



Jane Mussared
Chief Executive

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