

The Hon. Mark Butler, MP
Minister for Health & Aged Care
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
By email: minister.butler@health.gov.au

Dear Minister Butler,

It is with disappointment we understand that a decision has recently been made to discontinue funding of the National Clinical Evidence Taskforce guidance for management and care of people with COVID-19. We respectfully write, urging you to reconsider this decision.

It is essential that Australian healthcare professionals have access to regularly updated guidance to ensure they can provide the best possible care for Australians with COVID-19. The healthcare professional members of our organisations continue to face increasing COVID-19 case numbers and hospitalisations. The Department of Health articulated in its COVID-19 Management Plan that we should expect multiple further waves of COVID cases over the next two years, and the flow of research that needs to be translated into practice has not slowed.

The COVID-19 guidance produced by the National Clinical Evidence Taskforce is the principal source of clinical advice for Australian healthcare professionals. The vast majority of Federal, State, organisational and local health service guidelines, protocols and pathways rely heavily on the well-considered guidance produced by the Taskforce. The Taskforce website has had more than a million pageviews and over 650,000 unique users since its launch in 2020.

There is no viable alternative to the Taskforce guidance. The Taskforce has built a unique collaboration which is enabled by a massive un-funded in-kind contribution from senior representatives of 35 peak bodies representing groups critically involved in delivering care and 200+ clinicians. It also provides a centralised infrastructure for evidence identification and synthesis, consumer engagement, publication and dissemination. The combination of these is unlikely to be replicated elsewhere and enables efficient, rapid production of a single, consistent, guideline that covers the breadth of COVID-19 care in all settings and for all Australians.

Discontinuing funding for the Taskforce will potentially result in fragmented, rapidly outdated, and discordant guidance, reducing the quality of care and increasing poor health outcomes for Australians with COVID-19. Consumer literacy is a pillar of the National Medicines Policy and the Taskforce is pivotal in supporting front-line clinicians countering disinformation and enhancing consumer literacy.

Evidence-based guidance will be particularly important for healthcare professionals caring for Australians with long COVID. In the context of long COVID, as cases rise and new evidence emerges, we are particularly concerned about the likelihood of misinformation regarding treatment and investigations from community and corporate drivers putting further strain on the health budget. An evidence-based approach is needed to allay community concerns, protect the Australian billing system and decrease unnecessary workload for Australian healthcare professionals, including GPs.

With philanthropic funding, **the Taskforce has recently demonstrated the potential to respond to other urgent and emerging diseases**, producing living clinical guidelines for Monkeypox (MPX) and a living factsheet for Japanese Encephalitis. Continued funding of the Taskforce provides a potential model for and an initial step in the delivery of your commitment to create a CDC (Australian Centre for Disease Control). The development of a CDC building on learnings from the Taskforce would provide evidence-based guidance for a wide range of disease threats.

Throughout the pandemic **the Australian Government has repeatedly emphasised the importance of supporting Australia’s frontline healthcare workers** – our members – and we would encourage the Government to continue to demonstrate that commitment to healthcare workers through ongoing funding of the Taskforce. The value of a coordinated and scientifically rigorous approach, applied by the Taskforce, cannot be over emphasised on the impact of care for all Australians with COVID-19.

We respectfully ask you to continue to fund this valuable resource and maintain the significant volunteer engagement already achieved with a broad base of professional health societies and colleges. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

