

The invaluable contributions of general practice to Australia's COVID-19 pandemic response

Michael Kidd, Lucas de Toca, Paul Kelly

THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC has benefited greatly from the manifold contributions of general practice throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Australia's general practitioners (GPs) and members of their teams have made essential and valued contributions to the health and wellbeing of the population at this time of national emergency. GPs have demonstrated their flexibility and adaptability to ensure continuation of access to primary care services and local availability of key population health measures, including testing, vaccinations and treatments.

The past three years have been tough, and all our lives have experienced disruption and distress. As well as dealing with concerns about protecting their own loved ones, our nation's GPs have continued to support their patients and their communities. From dealing with the serious challenges of initial global shortages of personal protective equipment, to rapidly adopting telehealth as a means of providing care to all patients throughout lockdowns and for those in isolation after COVID-19 infection, GPs around the country have got on with their essential work.^{1,2}

GPs and primary healthcare nurses have delivered more COVID-19 vaccinations than anyone else in Australia and have done so in a highly cost-efficient, effective and equitable manner. Over 31.8 million of the >63 million COVID-19 vaccinations in Australia have been delivered through general practices, general practice-led respiratory clinics (GPRCs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations.³

GPs have also played an essential part in building and maintaining public confidence in the vaccination rollout, especially at times when advice was changing about eligibility and recommendations, and when antivaccination messaging was rife. GPs have been a trusted source of medical care and advice to their patients and important advocates for public health protections in their local communities, particularly for those at most risk of severe disease.

Many individual GPs have served as advisors on pandemic policy and programs, and as members of primary health network boards and national, state and territory public health committees, including the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation.

One element of Australia's successful primary care response to COVID-19 was the establishment of a nationwide network of 150 GPRCs in metropolitan and rural areas. These clinics were established with local GPs in March 2020 to assess, test and manage people with symptoms of respiratory tract infection and divert people with potential infection away from regular general practice clinics.⁴

Oral COVID-19 antiviral treatments became available early in 2022, and GPs across the country quickly began to safely prescribe these potentially life-saving therapies for their most at-risk patients.⁵ This was one of the most rapid universal adoptions of new treatments by GPs ever witnessed in Australia.

GPs have carried the burden of providing medical care for those in the community most at risk of the impact of COVID-19 infection, including people living in residential aged care homes.

At the same time, GPs have ensured the continued provision of regular primary care services to the whole community for the assessment and management of acute and chronic conditions, as well as mental health and preventive healthcare.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, most people with 'long COVID' symptoms have sought assistance and advice from their trusted GPs, and many will continue to do so as new infections continue into the year ahead.

Australia's GPs have demonstrated the fundamental role of primary care in pandemic planning and response, and that successful public health responses are reliant on effective engagement with primary care.

As we head into summer, and at a time when many GPs are feeling exhausted, underappreciated and undervalued, we wish to say thank you. Thank you for your dedication, commitment and courage throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for being the cornerstone of so many of our national responses to protect the people of our nation. Thank you for being there for your patients and your communities throughout these very challenging times.

Authors

Michael Kidd AM MBBS, MD, FAHMS, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, ACT; Professor of Primary Care Reform, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT

Lucas de Toca MBBS, First Assistant Secretary, Implementation and Primary Care Response, Primary Care Division, Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, ACT

Paul Kelly MBBS, PhD, FAFPHM, Chief Medical Officer, Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, ACT

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correspondence ajgp@racgp.org.au