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**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Chief Health Officer Report on the Status of the Public Health Emergency due to COVID-19
Report 12 – 15 March 2021**

**Presented by
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Minister for Health
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CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 15 MARCH 2021

Declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT

A public health emergency declaration is in force in the ACT due to the public health risk of COVID-19 to the ACT community. As Chief Health Officer, I make a recommendation to the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration remain in place at this time due to the ongoing public health risk COVID-19 presents.

The public health emergency declaration enables me, as Chief Health Officer, to take necessary actions to reduce threats to public health, including issuing public health directions that aim to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our community. These directions include the requirement for returned travellers to undertake hotel quarantine and for confirmed cases of COVID-19 and their close contacts to self-isolate.

The ACT's public health response is guided by the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and National Cabinet.

National situational update¹

As at 14 March 2021, there have been a total of 29,117 cases of COVID-19 in Australia and 909 deaths. The majority of cases reported nationally in the past fortnight were overseas acquired and diagnosed in hotel quarantine.

New South Wales situation

In NSW, one new locally acquired case of COVID-19 was reported on 14 March 2021 in a security guard who had been working within the NSW hotel quarantine system. Four household contacts of the case have returned negative COVID-19 test results and will continue to self-isolate for 14 days.

NSW Health has listed venues and public transport routes which had been visited by the confirmed cases and is considering any individuals who had been at the locations to be a close contact of the case, requiring them to get tested immediately and isolate for 14 days regardless of the result.

The ACT does not currently have any travel restrictions in place for people travelling to the ACT from NSW however ACT Health will continue to monitor the situation as testing and further contact tracing is undertaken.

Queensland situation

In Queensland, one new locally acquired case of COVID-19 was reported on 12 March 2021 in a doctor at the Princess Alexandra Hospital who had assessed two individuals with COVID-19 on 10 March 2021. The hospital was placed into lockdown with all non-essential visits to patients prohibited.

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers#at-a-glance> Coronavirus (COVID-19) at a glance – 15 March 2021, Australian Government Department of Health, accessed 15 March 2021

A Public Health Alert was issued by Queensland Health on 13 March 2021 instructing any individuals who had been in the listed exposure locations to immediately home quarantine until 11 March 2021 and contact health authorities. Queensland Health is undertaking contact tracing for close contacts of the new case and as of 15 March 2021, 86 close contacts had returned negative COVID-19 test results.

The ACT does not currently have any travel restrictions in place for people travelling to the ACT from Queensland however ACT Health will continue to monitor the situation as testing and further contact tracing is undertaken.

Victoria situation

In Victoria, a state-wide five-day lockdown was enforced from 11:59pm 12 February 2021 to 11:59pm 17 February 2021 in response to the Holiday Inn Melbourne Airport cluster. Non-ACT residents who were seeking to enter the ACT after the lockdown period had commenced were required to seek an exemption from ACT Health prior to their travel. 177 completed exemption requests were received by ACT Health with a total of 59 exemptions approved.

There were zero new locally acquired cases recorded outside of quarantine during the lockdown period and as a result, the ACT eased travel restrictions from 17 February 2021 by removing the state of Victoria as a COVID-19 affected area. Restrictions remained in place at that time for people who had been to a Tier One exposure site as listed by the Victorian Government. On 26 February 2021, the ACT removed all restrictions with Victoria.

As of 14 March 2021, no new cases have been reported in the past 16 days and there are only two active COVID-19 cases in the state, both in quarantine.

ACT situational update

In the ACT, as of 15 March 2021 there are five active cases of COVID-19, all of which are overseas acquired or close contacts of cases and are currently in hotel quarantine. There is no evidence of community transmission at this time. A total of 115 cases have recovered, and sadly there were three deaths early in the pandemic. This brings the total number of cases in the ACT to 123.

The number of tests undertaken in the past 14 days is lower than the previous 14 days, with the testing rate being above 1 test per 1,000 population. Since January 2021, testing rates have decreased in the older age groups (18-45 years and older than 45 years) and increased in the youngest group (less than 18 years). These changes appear to be independent of sex.

As at 15 March 2021, there are 209 persons in quarantine in the ACT including 144 people in hotel quarantine associated with a Government Facilitated Flight that arrived from Singapore on 1 March 2021. The flight had 177 passengers on board with 31 passengers continuing on to Sydney to undertake their quarantine. 146 passengers underwent health screening upon arrival at Canberra Airport and were safely moved into hotel quarantine by ACT Health, with support from ACT Policing and Australian Defence Force personnel. In addition, two individuals received an exemption to enter quarantine to support returning family members.

A total of five positive cases were reported in returned travellers associated with this flight. Two of the travellers returned a positive test result in their entry testing on 2 March 2021, a further two individuals returned positive results as part of day five testing on 7 March 2021

and one individual returned a positive test result on 9 March 2021. All five cases are the South African variant (B.1.135), which is a variant of concern.

The five positive cases were moved into medi-rooms within the hotel as each individual case was notified. The close contacts of these cases were provided with the option to either relocate to the medi-rooms with their family member or spend the remainder of their quarantine period in a separate room, depending on their family configuration and circumstances. Currently three close contacts remain in a separate part of the hotel after positive cases were moved into medi-rooms. The five positive cases and their close contacts will have their quarantine period extended, in line with national guidelines. The other 138 guests in quarantine will be released at 11:59pm on 15 March 2021 after receiving a negative COVID-19 exit test

The ACT has now received five Government Facilitated Flights since international border restrictions commenced in 2020, repatriating a total of 936 Australian citizens and permanent residents seeking to return home. The ACT also manages the frequent return of diplomats and government officials travelling to Canberra for official duties.

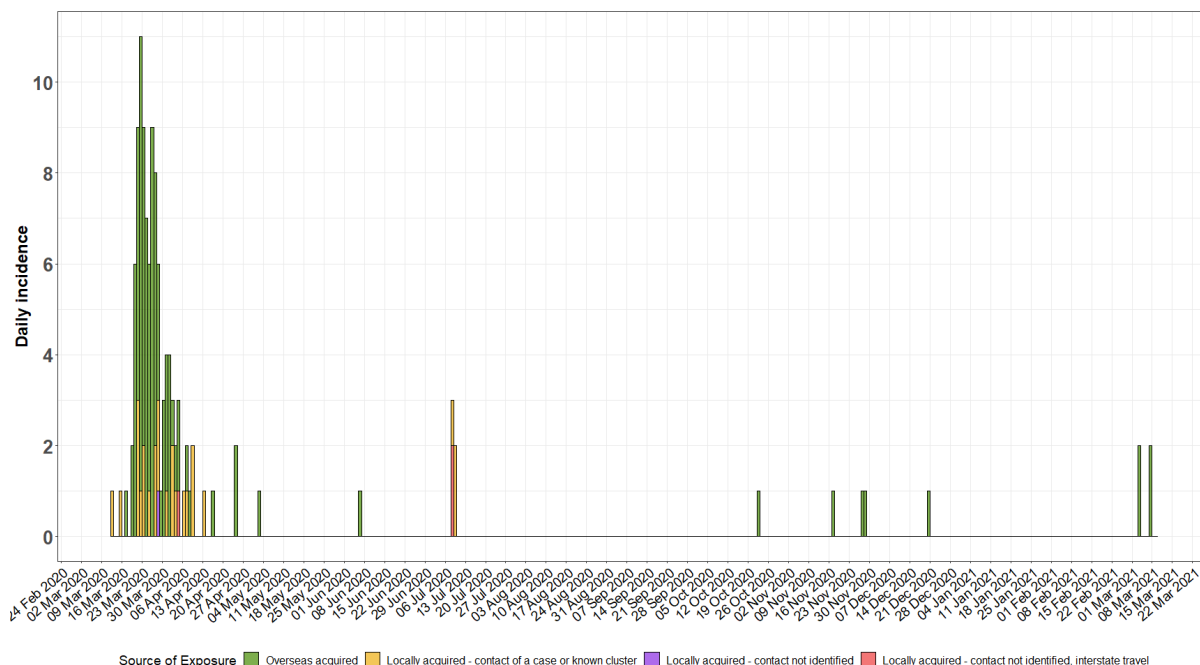
ACT Health has implemented the Safeguarding Canberrans (SCAN) Surveillance Program as part of a national approach to screening workers involved in the repatriation of Australians from overseas. All government and hotel staff involved in supporting Government Facilitated Flights are registered in SCAN and now receive daily saliva tests, a weekly deep nasal and throat swab as well as daily syndromic surveillance and detailed public health advice. To date, none of the individuals registered in the SCAN program have tested positive for COVID-19.

To date, ACT Policing has issued six criminal infringements (fines to three businesses and three individuals), 15 cautions, and made one arrest for breach of COVID-19 Public Health Directions. The rate of compliance across the ACT has been high throughout the pandemic, and the Canberra community has been receptive to COVID-19 restrictions and directions. ACT Policing will continue to conduct COVID-19 compliance activities including checking of individuals subject to current directions such as mandatory quarantine.

As at 14 March 2021, 9,711 venues in the ACT are registered with the Check In CBR app and there have been 464,770 downloads of the app and 5.34 million people checked in since its launch. The use of this app by patrons attending businesses and venues in the ACT provides additional assurance to ACT Health and the local community that contact tracing teams can respond quickly and effectively if a new locally acquired case is identified. The Check In CBR app has recently been improved to provide an add-on venue function which allows businesses to register patrons who are unable to do so themselves.

Health Protection Services, Access Canberra and ACT Policing will continue to undertake compliance and enforcement activity to help protect the community as the pandemic response continues.

Confirmed ACT COVID-19 cases by date of notification



Global situational update

Globally, as at 14 March 2021, there have been more than 119,220,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 2,640,000 deaths, reported to the World Health Organization. Most of the new cases over the past 14 days have been reported in the Americas and the European Region (41%). By country, the United States of America, Brazil and France reported the most cases over the past 14 days.

New Zealand situation

On 7 March 2021, New Zealand announced a border-related case of COVID-19 as a part of routine surveillance testing. All contacts of the air crew member have returned negative results so far. The Public Health assessment outlines a low risk to the public due to Auckland being at Alert Level 3 for the period which the positive case had returned to New Zealand and was either in isolation or at home.

In response to this new risk, the standing exemption made under the Returned Travellers Public Health Emergency Direction was amended to require people arriving in the ACT from New Zealand who had been in Auckland in the 14 days prior to their arrival to Australia (excluding transits via Auckland airport) to quarantine.

Any travellers who were already in the ACT and had previously been in Auckland on or after 20 February 2021 were required to get tested for COVID-19 and isolate until they received a negative result, or quarantine for 14 days if they had been in a 'location of interest' as identified by the New Zealand government.

ACT Health contacted 32 people with residential addresses in the ACT that may have arrived from New Zealand since 20 February 2021. 13 people indicated that they were in the ACT and had travelled from Auckland since 20 February 2021 and have all returned a negative COVID-19 test.

On 9 March 2021, the Australian Chief Medical Officer (CMO) reviewed the current New Zealand green zone flight arrangements and subsequently determined that from 11.59pm on 11 March 2021, people can travel from New Zealand to Australia without having to quarantine for 14 days. However, travellers are still required to have a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of the proposed travel. As a result, the ACT's travel restrictions on arrivals from New Zealand were revoked at 11:59pm on 11 March 2021.

The ACT community's response

The efforts of the ACT community, including businesses, have been vital in slowing the spread of COVID-19. Businesses are asked to follow their COVID Safety Plans to support the safety of the community and their staff. For certain businesses, venues and facilities, use of the Check In CBR app became mandatory from 6 March 2021. Restricted businesses include cafés, restaurants, clubs, beauty salons, hairdressers, adult services, swimming pools, fitness centres, cultural institutions, gaming and gambling venues, and entertainment venues, among others.

The Check In CBR app is free, secure and convenient and enables ACT Health to quickly access patron information to alert people who may have been in contact with a person with COVID-19, if required. The Check In CBR app has been successfully used in the ACT since September 2020, with a number of other jurisdictions adopting the technology.

The community is being reminded to follow the health advice to ensure we keep ourselves and the community safe. As we move through this next stage of the pandemic we ask Canberrans to:

- Physically distance from other groups whenever possible
- Continue good hand and respiratory hygiene
- Use the Check In CBR app to check in when out and about
- Stay home if unwell and get tested if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms
- Monitor travel advice.

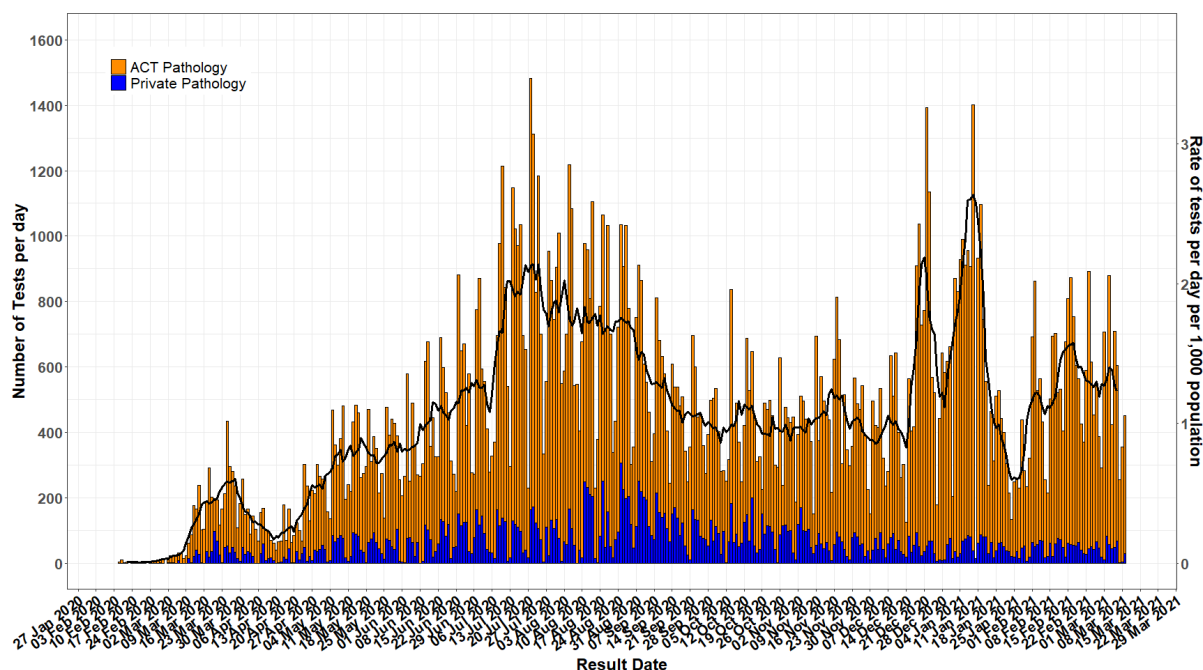
Surveillance and monitoring

Testing numbers in the ACT continue to remain strong with a total of 179,432 negative tests conducted as of 15 March 2021.

Of the total number of tests conducted in the past month, there have been a total of six confirmed cases in the ACT, with five active cases reported and one historical case identified. There is no new evidence of community transmission, which is a testament to Canberrans doing the right thing and following public health advice, including notifying ACT Health before returning from a COVID affected area, and quarantining and getting tested if required.

It remains essential that Canberrans present for testing if experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms, no matter how mild. Continued high rates of testing are crucial to maintain rigorous surveillance, closely monitor the situation and act quickly if a case is detected or new cases emerge in other jurisdictions.

All COVID-19 tests for ACT Residents in the ACT by result date: all laboratories



Wastewater testing

To strengthen our surveillance, the ACT has joined the NSW Health Wastewater COVID Surveillance Programme. For several months, a wastewater sample has been collected weekly from the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Plant, which receives wastewater from over 99 per cent of the ACT population. Since the start of December 2020, the sampling strategy has been strengthened to additionally include sampling from 5 sites across the ACT, with catchment areas ranging from approximately 40,000 people to approximately 100,000 people.

On 9 March 2021, fragments of SARS-CoV-2 were detected in the ACT's ongoing wastewater surveillance program at the City Central site. It is most likely that this detection is related to the positive cases in hotel quarantine, however ACT Health is reminding all ACT residents to get tested for COVID-19 even with the mildest of symptoms. Further wastewater testing will be conducted as part of the routine testing program.

Vaccination program

Phase 1a of the ACT's COVID-19 Vaccination Program commenced on 22 February 2021. The first people to receive the vaccine are those who need it most, initially people with a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms and those who are at greater risk of exposure, infection or transmitting the virus.

ACT Health and Canberra Health Services have established the ACT's Vaccination Hub at the Garran Surge Centre and commenced administering the first phase of vaccinations to identified priority groups, namely quarantine and border workers and frontline healthcare workers.

The Garran Surge Centre is being used to administer both Pfizer/BioNTech and Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccines to individuals within the Phase 1a priority group and as of 15 March 2021, a total of 3,360 vaccinations have been administered by the ACT Government in the ACT.

Staff and residents in disability and aged residential care are also included in Phase 1a of the national rollout with the Commonwealth Government responsible for providing vaccinations to these priority groups.

Phase 1b of the national rollout is due to commence on 20 March 2021 with critical and high-risk workers including defence, police, fire, emergency services and other public sector health workers included in the priority groups for this phase of the vaccine.

The roll-out of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines is being guided by the Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth Government and ACT Government in relation to the implementation of a COVID-19 Vaccination Program. ACT Health has been working, and will continue to work, closely with the Commonwealth Government to ensure Canberrans are well informed about the vaccination program.

The ACT's priority continues to be the delivery of a safe, efficient, and targeted vaccination program.

Easing of restrictions

The ACT moved to a new set of 'COVID-normal' restrictions from 9am on 20 February 2021 following consideration at the 12 February 2021 public health checkpoint. The ACT's cautious approach to the easing of restrictions throughout the pandemic has enabled us to remain in a strong position while also helping ACT businesses and the community to continue to move forward.

The key changes to restrictions include:

- Businesses and venues wishing to have more than 25 people across their premises can apply the one person per two square metres of usable space rule in both indoor and outdoor spaces.
- Cinemas and theatres can sell up to 75 per cent capacity of each individual cinema or theatre, provided that their COVID Safety Plans have been endorsed by ACT Health. Otherwise, cinemas and theatres must remain at 65 per cent capacity. To date, the Chief Health Officer has endorsed five COVID Safety Plans for cinemas in the ACT.
- Large indoor performance venues (with forward-facing and tiered seating, such as theatres and arenas) can have events up to 75 per cent capacity, provided the events are ticketed and seated, and a COVID Safety Plan is in place for each event.
- The National Convention Centre is permitted to have 75 per cent capacity within each indoor and outdoor space, provided they have a COVID Safety Plan endorsed by ACT Health. Multi-day events are also permitted.
- Exhibition Park in Canberra (EPIC) is permitted to have 75 per cent capacity within each indoor and outdoor space up to 2,000 people, provided they have a COVID Safety Plan endorsed by ACT Health. Events greater than 2,000 people will be required to adhere to requirements within the COVID Safe Event Protocol.
- Enclosed outdoor venues with permanent tiered seating and grandstands, including GIO Stadium and Manuka Oval, can have 100 per cent capacity for fixed seating, provided events are ticketed and seated and a COVID Safety Plan is in place for each event.
- Patrons can now also stand while eating and drinking in indoor and outdoor areas.

- Unless otherwise provided for in the public health direction, events and gatherings over 1,000 people will require an exemption. Exemptions may be granted for events and gatherings for up to 10,000 people on application, in accordance with the COVID Safe Event Protocol.
- Events between 501 and 1,000 people must notify ACT Health of their event and submit a COVID Safety Plan for review.

As part of this latest easing of restrictions, the use of the Check In CBR app became mandatory for restricted business and venues from 6 March 2021. This is an important step in our efforts to keep businesses and venues open with increased capacity, while ensuring ACT Health can quickly and accurately conduct contact tracing should there be a new COVID-19 case reported in the ACT.

Conclusion

The ACT along with all other jurisdictions across Australia is progressing well in managing the pandemic. However, a range of public health restrictions remain in place to minimise the risk of future outbreaks of COVID-19, particularly as variants of concern continue to be identified in hotel quarantine. The ACT is continuing to work closely with the Commonwealth Government and all jurisdictions to ensure our quarantine system is robust and that we have appropriate infection prevention control measures including the SCAN program to reduce the risk of introduction of these strains of the disease into the community.

ACT Health is working closely with the Commonwealth Department of Health to guide the implementation of our COVID-19 vaccination program and further rollout with our priority to deliver a safe, efficient and targeted vaccination program for Canberrans, and keep the community well informed about the program.

The situation across the world is a reminder that the pandemic is far from over and the risk of new cases emerging remains high until effective vaccine has been widely rolled out. AHPPC advises that Australia will continue to see cases and periodic outbreaks. The ACT is focusing on maintaining robust risk mitigation measures, continuing enhanced surveillance in the community and outbreak planning for at-risk settings.

The ACT's focus is early detection of cases; preparedness to thoroughly investigate cases, clusters and outbreaks and ensure our workforce is equipped to surge when required; and public messaging to community and businesses around the importance of continuing to practise COVID safe behaviours. Restrictions have been eased with the ACT moving to a new 'COVID-normal' however it is vital that the community continues to follow the health advice and public health directions to control the spread of COVID-19 in the ACT.

Recommendation

As Chief Health Officer, I advise the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration continues to be justified due to the public health risk posed by COVID-19. At this time, it remains necessary to maintain public health control measures to safeguard against a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the ACT. All Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continuing to focus on suppression of COVID-19.