



## Response to the Australian Government's COVID-19 Response Inquiry

**Executive Summary:** The Continuity of Care Collaboration (CCC) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this critical inquiry. Our unique collaborative model, vision for prioritized healthcare, mission-driven initiatives, and data-driven approaches position us to provide valuable insights into the pandemic's impact on healthcare continuity and recommendations for future resilience.

**Introduction:** The CCC represents a unique spectrum of healthcare stakeholders, including patient organizations, industry, peak bodies, and healthcare providers from public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. Our vision is to ensure all Australians prioritise their healthcare for a productive nation, and our mission is to encourage Australians to maintain their ongoing healthcare needs. As a collective voice in healthcare matters, we do not replace individual member companies but enhance their impact through collaboration. We are a not-for-profit organisation with over 25 members and more information can be found at [www.continuityofcare.org.au](http://www.continuityofcare.org.au) and further information in the appendix.

The two areas where the CCC would like to contribute to are:

- **Terms of Reference: Key health response measures (for example across COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments, key medical supplies such as personal protective equipment, quarantine facilities, and public health messaging).**
- **Terms of Reference: Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19 and/or lockdowns (for example mental health and suicide prevention supports, and access to screening and other preventive health measures).**

The CCC was an integral partner in public health messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the well-regarded public health campaign of #dontwaitmate where there were two key elements of public health messaging.

The high-level key messages were:

- **Priority:** If you have an acute or chronic health condition that requires a clinical interaction, it is important you have it. This included keeping up with your regular preventative screening tests.
- **Safety:** Clinical providers are ensuring measures to protect patients from COVID-19 infection. This was to ensure that people felt safe in keeping up with their regular healthcare checks and tests, as well as vaccine information.

The CCC was a communication channel that achieved the following in the pandemic:

- The Collaboration conducted a multi-channel communications campaign including a sustained earned media campaign from April to June 2020 focussing on chronic health conditions. There was high journalist interest in the implications from the fall in healthcare interactions.



- The large number of prominent CCC members provided depth and credibility to messages, and storylines could be adapted to member's areas of expertise.
- An open letter signed by CCC members was published nationally in Fairfax Media, The Herald and Weekly Times and pharmacy media.
- The CCC generated over 75 storylines on the issue featuring spokespeople from the RACGP, AMA, Diabetes Australia, Medicines Australia and The Heart Foundation.
- A CCC survey of 729 consumers found 32% of respondents had delayed a GP during the pandemic, and 21% a pathology test. 59% were worried they would be around people with COVID-19 when attending health appointments, and 55% felt it was safe to delay regular appointments if their condition had not changed.
- Social media creative was shared throughout CCC channels reaching more than 1.4 million people. A webinar on the CCC aimed at patients had more than 200 register to attend.
- London Agency engaged Federal politicians to post social media videos encouraging their constituents to maintain healthcare. Participating MPs included Dr Katie Allen, Dr Michael Freeland, Linda Burney, Graham Perrett, Gavin Pearce and Jason Clare.
- Throughout the campaign the CCC engaged with Federal and State Health Ministers and the Department of Health. The CCC key messages featured in the media briefings by Deputy CMO Prof Michael Kidd (2nd May) and also Minister for Health Greg Hunt MP. "If you have missed a test, if you have missed a scan, please go and get it" Greg Hunt, media conference, 28th May 2020

**The CCC's Point of Difference:** The CCC focuses on seven areas of care: Prevention; Chronic Disease Management; Vaccination; Cancer Screening; Adherence to Medicines; Acute Care Management; and Pathology Testing.

These communications across the member group meant that we reached over 2 million Australians and provided the necessary support for people to feel informed and safe.

Our response and recommendations are underpinned by authoritative data provided through exclusive partnerships with national and state-based pathology partners. This data-driven backbone allows us to measure the impact of our campaigns and adjust our strategies based on the evolving healthcare requirements of Australians.

**Healthcare During the Pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted healthcare engagement in Australia. The CCC, through its authoritative data and analysis provided by Deakin University, has identified concerning trends in pathology testing uptake.



This decline has potential long-term repercussions for disease management and preventive health measures.

**Impact of Government Decisions:** The government's response, both at the national and state level, has been critical to managing the pandemic. The CCC acknowledges the complexity of these decisions and their direct and indirect impacts on healthcare access. Our data indicates that clearer communication and a more integrated approach could have mitigated some of these effects. It is imperative moving forward that communications to all Australians remain consistent and educate people for the short-term and long-term.

**Recommendations for Future Preparedness:** Informed by our authoritative data and the collective expertise of our members, the CCC recommends:

1. **Strengthening Data Integration:** Establishing a framework for real-time data sharing between government health departments and organizations like the CCC.
  - Timely data i.e. real-time or within a 30-day period is essential to be able to make informed decisions and see key trends in healthcare data that need immediate solutions.
2. **Enhancing Communication Strategies:** Ensuring clear, consistent, and actionable public health messaging that aligns with data trends and healthcare service availability.
  - The CCC demonstrated that by working across multiple stakeholder's groups from patients, industry, peak bodies, and patient organisations, that cause, and effect were noted for each decision that was made by the government. For example, when one group was the main implementer of a strategy i.e. vaccine rollout, patients and other organisations were able to identify unintended consequences of the implementation i.e. misinformation or lack of information, and CCC public health messaging was able to be crafted to ensure understanding and the correct information. This was then shared across all CCC members to keep as many people informed as possible.
  - Another recommendation is that we have one consistent source of messaging. It became very confusing and complex at times with having both Federal Government and State Government messaging and various healthcare protocols. To be prepared for another pandemic, one source of information with a consistent approach from all a National and State perspective is optimal. It also needs to be messaging that is educating Australians for the long-term to ensure that people can make informed choices and decisions about their healthcare. Too often the communications were 'parent-child' rather than peer to peer, which would have resulted in much more clear and effective messaging.
  - The target audience is Australians requiring regular interaction with medical services and a successful campaign outcome would be a return to pre COVID-



19 healthcare patterns especially in terms of preventative screening tests to ensure cancer diagnoses are diagnosed earlier.

3. **Improving Healthcare Access:** Developing resilient systems for maintaining healthcare services, including telehealth and digital health platforms, to support continuity of care during crises.
  - A big step forward for Australian healthcare was the implementation of Telehealth services and e-scripts. This was very welcomed by all patient organisations, peak bodies, and healthcare industries, as it allowed Australians to have choice in the manner in which they access their healthcare services but also provided many patients with a 'safe' way to access services when they did not feel 'safe'. This was very pronounced with patients who were immunocompromised who were avoiding going into hospital care settings to not contract COVID-19. The CCC strongly advocates for both Telehealth and E-scripts to become more embedded into the healthcare system as it provides a lot of value for patients and efficiencies within healthcare.
  - MyHealthRecord is another important tool for Australians to be able to access their health records, pathology tests and vaccination record. This needs to be further implemented and more education around how to access it and fully utilise the functionality of which the CCC can be an integral partner for the government.
  - The CCC would also advocate for a more integrated system that allows for more timely data access as well as the ability to measure patient outcomes.
  
4. **Investing in Healthcare Infrastructure:** Addressing workforce shortages and system inefficiencies highlighted during the pandemic to bolster the healthcare sector's capacity.
  - This is one of the most important aspects of Australian healthcare. We need to look at innovative ways to attract more staff into the professional healthcare areas and we also need to look at how we resource various areas with task-shifting. We saw during the pandemic, that pharmacists were able to provide COVID-19 and FLU vaccinations at their pharmacies, and this helped to reduce the burden on GP's workloads and also provided Australians with a way to access that was convenient and local to them. We need to see all key stakeholders look at ways to reduce workloads and bottlenecks within the system to ensure efficiencies and cost savings are fully realised. The CCC can play a major role in this with member surveys, stakeholder meetings and Think Tanks.

**Conclusion:** The CCC is committed to working with the government and other key stakeholders to enhance Australia's pandemic preparedness. Our unique collaboration, driven by a shared vision and grounded in data, stands ready to support an Australian healthcare system that is resilient, adaptive, and patient-centred.



We thank the Inquiry Panel for considering our submission and look forward to contributing further to the discourse on improving Australia's healthcare system in the face of future challenges.

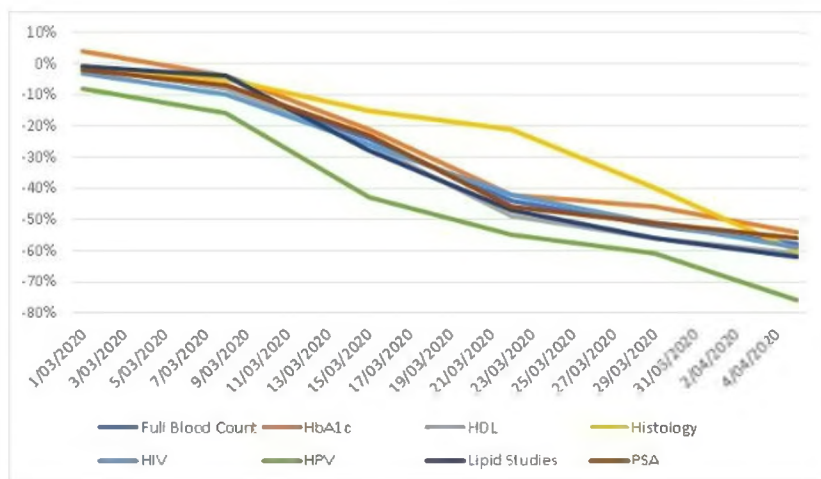
### Appendices:

- Data reports and analysis from Deakin University.
- Case studies demonstrating the impact of CCC campaigns.
- Evidence of healthcare engagement trends during the pandemic.

### DATA REPORTS / CASE STUDIES

Two large private pathology laboratories provided access to their weekly testing data compared to the weekly average for February – before COVID-19 restrictions occurred. This allowed the CCC to see trends in consumer behaviour within days of it occurring – far quicker than via sources e.g. MBS data. These insights meant that the CCC could quickly identify and prioritise issues, develop and distribute key messages and then measure impact.

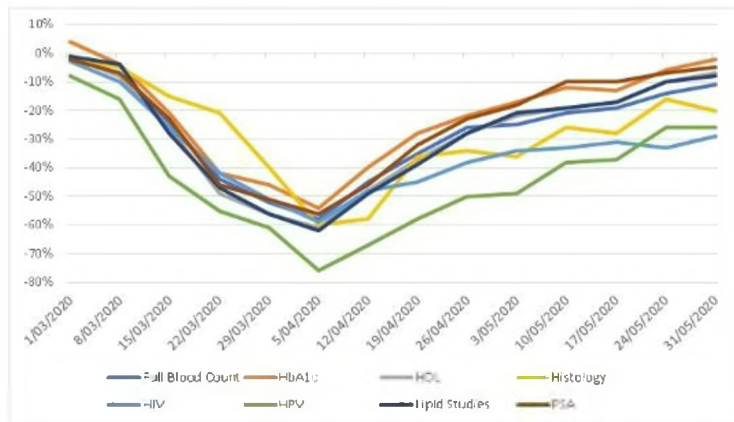
Pathology testing rates, March-April



As of June 2020, healthcare participation is significantly improved. Private Healthcare Australia data shows general treatment services have rebounded to 85% of normal rates. Pathology testing rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels. In the week of 8<sup>th</sup> June, testing participation for diabetes (HbA1c) and cancer (histology) exceeded the weekly average for February 2020.



## Pathology testing rates, March-June 2020



Campaign messaging is pivoting to an onus to make up for missed healthcare with the theme of a “catch up, check-up”.

The creativity and innovation of the program was that such a large and diverse group of healthcare stakeholders has never engaged to participate on a health issue and mobilised in such a short time. As one CCC member described “we have been able to create something, that Government and others have been unable to do”.

Given the high stakes and short time frame, a low touch governance model was adopted to enable rapid activation.

The combined reach of the CCC members through owned and earned media channels enabled a vast impact.

The group’s focus on data has enabled accurate identification of high-needs areas and impact measurement.

The actions of the CCC were achieved with virtually no campaign budget other than the “sweat equity” of its participants and delivered during a time of significant disruption to the business operations of all members.

It is testament to the achievements of the CCC that its model is now being adopted by healthcare organisations in countries including India, Singapore and Malaysia.

*“We all have a responsibility to keep people safe and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Patients need to continue with their regular GP visits, pathology testing, vaccinations and taking medications, as we want to ensure that peoples’ health is managed now and in the long-term.”*

Elizabeth de Somer, CEO of Medicines Australia, CCC launch media release.