



Amy MacMahon MP

Member for South Brisbane



Hon Anastacia Palaszczuk
Premier and Minister for the Olympics
Via email: thepremier@premiers.qld.gov.au

Hon Yvette D'Ath
Minister for Health and Ambulance Services
Via email: health@ministerial.qld.gov.au

7 January 2022

Dear Premier & Minister D'Ath,

I write to relay my community's extreme disappointment in your government's failure to adequately prepare for the current COVID outbreak. While I understand that the emergence of the Omicron variant has created significant new challenges, it's clear that our public hospitals and health system have been left under-resourced to deal with this pandemic. Given that your government has had nearly two years to prepare, this is completely unacceptable.

It's absolutely critical that your government acts now and urgently boosts funding and resourcing across the entire public health system, from testing through to hospital capacity. Some key emerging issues that need your urgent attention are:

1. A grave lack of clarity around access to the COVID Care at Home program, or any other Queensland Health support, for people who test positive, leaving people without support;
2. Serious failures in Queensland's testing systems, and the need to ramp up testing capacity and;
3. Bolstering our public hospital capacity now before our health system reaches crisis point.

1. Access to health care and support for people with COVID-19

On Wednesday, the Chief Health Officer advised healthy, young adults, particularly those who have been vaccinated, to assume they have COVID if they have symptoms and to stay at home instead of seeking a PCR test. This advice, combined with the significant number of Queenslanders who are reporting that they have been unable to access a PCR test, means thousands of Queenslanders will be COVID positive without their details being logged with Queensland Health.

In addition to this, my office has also heard from constituents who have not been contacted by Queensland Health despite returning a positive PCR test. With regular reports of people not being able to get through



to the 134 COVID Hotline, people are left without an avenue to seek support from Queensland Health other than the emergency department.

My office sought advice from the Health Minister's office regarding how these Queenslanders could access health care and support from Queensland Health. Both the Health Minister's office and Queensland Health were unable to provide an answer other than:

"People are advised to stay at home if they are unwell and monitor their symptoms. If they experience breathlessness, chest pains or are significantly dizzy then they should contact 134COVID or seek medical assistance."

A grave concern is that there will be people who test positive, and are unsure how they can access care and support from health professionals if their symptoms worsen. Anecdotal evidence¹ from other parts of the country suggests that many people who have died from COVID at home were: not known to health authorities, only diagnosed after they died and/or largely from non-English speaking and migrant backgrounds.

It is unclear how people who have COVID, but have not been contacted by Queensland Health, can access the COVID Care at Home program, or any other Queensland Health support other than presenting to the emergency department. While the vast majority of people will have only mild to moderate symptoms, the scale of the spread means that statistically a significant number of people will have more severe symptoms and need medical care.

COVID Care at Home details indicate that some people may need medical monitoring devices.² Devices such as oximeters, that measure people's oxygen levels while at home, are crucial to preventing unnecessary deaths. As with Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), such devices should be free and readily available for anyone who needs one, while isolating and recovering. I urge your government to rapidly acquire and distribute oximeters and other monitoring devices to COVID positive Queenslanders.

I note that last year, the Australian Medical Association Queensland (AMAQ) were calling for a strengthening of the role of GPs to care for COVID patients at home. My office is now hearing reports from GPs who are unclear about their roles and responsibilities when people with COVID are contacting them. Both GPs and the community need clarity about the role of GPs caring for people at home.

Information about what people should do once testing positive also needs to be available in multiple languages and formats, to ensure equitable access, and the safety of CALD and disabled communities.

¹<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-27/australians-dying-at-home-with-covid-19-sydney-melbourne/100482978>

²https://www.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/231218/care-at-home.pdf



It's absolutely critical that your government urgently bolsters Queensland Health's resources so that every Queenslanders has easy access to the COVID Care at Home program. Every day that you delay this risks more preventable deaths.

2. PCR and RAT testing capacity

For many in our community, it was incredibly distressing to see the lack of planning and preparation for ramping up testing capacity during the Christmas period following the opening of our state borders. The long delays to access PCR testing, and then receive results, has been causing serious stress to many in the community and putting people's lives at risk. In addition, confusion and delays around testing will result in grave inaccuracies in daily case numbers, making it difficult for hospitals, and the broader health system, to plan ahead.

The Christmas shut down of private pathology clinics, the need for staff to isolate due to COVID exposures, the increased demand for tests due to border crossing requirements, and the shift from batch testing to individual testing due to increased positive cases, all could have been anticipated, modelled and planned for.

At-home Rapid Antigen tests have been available for use in Australia since 1 November 2021. In the UK they have been used at a mass scale from early 2021 onward. Understandably, local residents are horrified that both our state and federal governments made no plans to acquire and distribute RATs at the mass scale until our testing system was already in crisis. It's my understanding that the National Cabinet has only recently resolved to make a limited number of RATs free for concession card holders via pharmacies, and RATs available at testing sites. In the midst of a pandemic, RATs should be free and readily available for everyone, whenever they need one.

It is critical now that the state government steps up, does everything in its power to expand our PCR testing capacity at this late stage, make RATs free and available for all Queenslanders and secures an ongoing supply of RATs. Further to this, information on RATs and PCR needs to be available in multiple languages and formats, to ensure equitable access, and the safety of CALD and disabled communities.

3. Hospital Capacity

Queensland is likely just 2-3 weeks behind NSW when it comes to daily case numbers and number of hospitalisations when adjusted for population. Both state's hospitals have similar available beds to population ratios. It's reasonable to anticipate that Queensland is 2-3 weeks away from experiencing the same crisis NSW's hospitals are currently facing.³

Our ICU cases are thankfully low at the moment, however this will not be the situation as case numbers rise in the coming weeks. The QIMR modelling from last year suggested that the hospital system would cope

³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/myhospitals>



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with around 400 cases in ICU.⁴ However, this modelling is now inaccurate, given current conditions. It is now unclear if our hospitals will be able to deal with an unknown number of serious cases.

Queensland public health care workers have been raising the alarm over the last two years about how underfunded and underprepared our hospitals are. The AMAQ highlighted the critical need for massive investment in our public hospitals to cope with demand in their budget submission back in May 2021.⁵

Both health workers and the wider community are rightly furious that our hospital capacity was not significantly expanded over the last two years in preparation for the current crisis. While I understand that our options to expand our hospital capacity are limited now with such a short-time frame, I implore your government to do everything in its power to rapidly expand our hospital capacity.

Over the last two years Queenslanders have made immense sacrifices and worked hard to keep our community safe. They have put their trust in your government to keep them and our wider community safe and well. The state government has had almost two years to prepare for this outbreak, and Queenslanders have a right to expect that our public hospitals and health system will be equipped with the resources they need.

I'd urge your government to spare no expense in urgently bolstering our public hospitals and health system capacity to deal with this crisis, and put the health and wellbeing of all Queenslanders above all else. There are myriad solutions available if sufficient funding is brought online. For a start, you could: institute pandemic bonuses and additional support for all public health staff, expanding public coordination of private health and pathology capacity including GPs, redeploy public servants and contractors to fast track a system to register positive RAT tests and expand the 134 COVID line capacity, and massively invest in oximeters, RATs and other health monitoring devices.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office on 3724 9100 if you would like to discuss this matter in more detail.

Kind regards,

Amy MacMahon

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⁴https://www.covid19.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/216939/qimr-berghofer-modelling-covid-in-qld-report.pdf

⁵<https://qld.ama.com.au/AMA-Queensland-2021-22-Budget-Submission>