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AMA CALLS FOR AUSTRALIA TO PROVIDE MORE SUPPORT TO PNG

The AMA is calling on the Australian Government to urgently dispatch more of our domestically produced AstraZeneca vaccine to Papua New Guinea, our nearest neighbour, to help it combat the worsening COVID-19 outbreak.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday confirmed that the Government is considering options to further help Papua New Guinea, including the provision of Australian doses.

“It’s encouraging that the Prime Minister is considering this option, but it’s time to act now. The rapid increase in reported virus infections and deaths across Papua New Guinea is alarming,” AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, said today.

“Late last month, we saw case numbers almost double in a week, with a high proportion of those infections among our healthcare colleagues.

“We also know there are many undetected infections and underreported deaths, so the need to support Papua New Guinea’s vaccination effort is urgent and vital.”

In mid-March, 8,000 AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines were dispatched by Australia to Papua New Guinea. Australia has requested European authorities to direct one million doses of Australia’s contracted AstraZeneca supplies to Papua New Guinea. But the delays in Europe acting on the request mean Australia must take a leadership role in the region using our domestic supply.

Papua New Guinea had been managing COVID-19 well, but a severe outbreak in February has led to more than 5000 cases, with over 500 recorded in a single day in late March.

“Low testing rates mean this figure is likely much higher,” Dr Khorshid said.

“In a country with limited health resources, this is a serious risk to all of us. Supplying our near neighbour with some of our domestically manufactured AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines is simply the right thing to do.

“We need to ensure that vaccine supplies to Papua New Guinea are sufficient to prevent a health crisis worsening into a humanitarian crisis.

“And the reality is this will also help with our COVID-19 efforts.

“Over the past few weeks, we’ve seen many of the cases of COVID-19 in hotel quarantine originating from Papua New Guinea, and sadly the death this week of former PNG Governor Malcolm Smith in a Brisbane hospital.

“We know that positive cases in hotel quarantine can, and will, leak into the Australian community – this is not a virus that abides by borders.

“With one million doses now being locally produced each week, there is capacity to send a regular and modest amount to Papua New Guinea, while helping our quarantine efforts at the same time.

“The release of a steady flow of doses will not have a great impact on our vaccination program, but will make a huge difference to the Papua New Guinea community and the safety of the region.

“The COVID-19 outbreak in Papua New Guinea is a sobering reminder that the pandemic is far from over. Australia has had one of the best responses globally, but we are still vulnerable to outbreaks in our region,” Dr Khorshid said.

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