

D20/4133

21 September 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL  
ASSOCIATION  
ABN 37 008 426 793

T | 61 2 6270 5400  
F | 61 2 6270 5499  
E | [info@ama.com.au](mailto:info@ama.com.au)  
W | [www.ama.com.au](http://www.ama.com.au)

42 Macquarie St Barton ACT 2600  
PO Box 6090 Kingston ACT 2604

Dear Prime Minister

### **Need for Urgent Action in Aged Care**

We have joined to express our ongoing concerns regarding the impact of COVID-19 on residents in Australian nursing homes and the need to do more to address this. While welcoming your recent announcement of increased funding for the sector, which will go some way to enabling people to stay in their own homes longer and increase infection control for those in nursing homes, we remain concerned that the sector is still vulnerable and that our members working in aged care face unacceptable risks of contracting the virus.

The aged care sector was not well prepared to deal with COVID-19. It has suffered from a lack of funding over many years and this is reflected in all aspects of nursing home operations and the standard of care being provided. There are too few nurses working in aged care and an over reliance on lower skilled workers. Attention to infection control has been inadequate and access to medical care is also insufficient. These significant and systemic problems were known before, but the proceedings of the Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care have revealed the true extent of their severity. Rather than waiting for the final report of these proceedings, the Government can act now to resolve some of these problems and save lives.

### **Improved preparation through better coordination**

While Victoria and, to a much lesser extent New South Wales, have been the epicentres of COVID-19 outbreaks in Australia, these outbreaks could still happen in any jurisdiction. Our members are deeply concerned at what they are seeing in nursing homes across the country and the failure to properly prepare them for potential outbreaks in the local community. The ANMF has surveyed members and, even in the middle of a pandemic, 64 per cent of those who responded reported staffing cuts and/or reductions in hours. This puts lives at risk.

To date policy regarding COVID-19 in aged care has been largely reactive and the lines of responsibility between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories are blurred and, unlike in disaster situations, there is no unity of command that can overcome jurisdictional boundaries.

In our assessment, the current approach is siloed and none of the responsible bodies, including the Department of Health, the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission and local Public Health Units have done enough to prepare the sector for this pandemic. While states/territories are moving to establish emergency response centres within their existing structures, this appears to be a continuation of this siloed approach. We propose that the nationally agreed Aged Care Health Emergency Response Operations Centres (ACERC) should be established now in order to help prevent outbreaks through

better coordination and support, rather than being called in to pick up the pieces when it is too late.

### **Workforce**

Victoria has seen a significant number of Health Care Worker (HCW) infections, particularly among aged care workers. Nurses are highly skilled in delivering quality person centred care and are well trained in and understand the importance of infection prevention and control. We again call on the Government to implement mandated minimum staff-to-resident ratios and a mandated skill mix with registered nurse presence ensured 24/7. This must form a central part of the Government's response to COVID-19 in aged care and contribute to long-term reforms to better meet the care needs of residents.

### **Infection Control and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Our members report ongoing problems in accessing adequate PPE in nursing homes, while insufficient attention is being paid to basic infection control systems and process. The relevant agencies should be working together to deliver wrap around support to nursing homes with access to PPE, training in infection control, and in reviewing infection control procedures. This process should not be punitive and instead focus on bringing up all facilities to a common and acceptable standard.

Based on the Newmarch House COVID-19 Outbreak Independent Review and experiences in Victoria, it is also clear that general practitioners (GPs) must be included in nursing homes pandemic plans and infection prevention and control.

### **Paid Pandemic Leave**

We acknowledge that the Commonwealth has, in partnership with some states/territories, introduced a Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment. The Fair Work Commission has also introduced Paid Pandemic Leave for aged care workers. However, we are still concerned that employees are continuing to turn up to work when they are ill due to economic pressures. The current arrangements are piecemeal, and we would encourage you to implement national Paid Pandemic Leave arrangements as part of a critical safety net to encourage those who are feeling ill to self-isolate and get tested.

No aged care worker should be financially disadvantaged as a result of taking measures to limit the spread of infection.

### **Increased funding for home care packages**

Australia has a high proportion of older people living in institutional care when compared with similar nations. While older Australians would prefer to stay in their home they are often unable to do so because of long waiting lists for home care packages, especially level four. More funding is needed to solve this problem. This would improve their quality of life, reduce pressure on an already stressed sector and reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

### **Transparency of Government-funding**

As noted earlier, your extra investments in aged care are welcome. However, there is little accountability with respect to how funding is spent by aged care providers. Much more transparency is required and it is critical that this funding goes where it is most needed, including for more staff and other critical resources to ensure adequate care for our elderly.

Australia has done well in responding to COVID-19 and we acknowledge the significant work undertaken by the Commonwealth. However, extra effort and attention is required to protect and support our aged care residents. Ultimately, the best way to keep COVID-19 out of aged care is to keep

it out of the community through strong measures to prevent the transmission of the virus. Our organisations will continue to support governments at all levels to take the optimal decisions required to achieve the stated national goal of zero community transmission.

Yours sincerely



Omar Khorshid  
AMA President



Annie Butler  
Federal Secretary Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation