

Media Release

The Hon Daniel Andrews MP
Premier



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PROTECTING OUR HEALTHCARE HEROES

A big program of work is already underway to drive down coronavirus infections in our healthcare workers as new research released today confirms that most cases are acquiring the virus at work.

Every single health service in Victoria will be checked to make sure it is COVIDSafe, 'PPE spotters' will be introduced, potential aerosol hot spots will be studied and fit testing will be trialled for staff at highest risk – providing more protection to our dedicated healthcare workers who continue to keep us safe.

Part of a strategy to further drive down infections among our healthcare heroes, these actions have been recommended on the advice of the newly established Healthcare Worker Infection Prevention and Wellbeing Taskforce, which brings together infection control experts and workforce representatives to examine what more can be done to stop the spread of coronavirus in our healthcare facilities.

A detailed analysis of healthcare infections released today shows that healthcare workers in aged care settings account for around two in five infections, and hospital workers around one-third. Approximately 22 per cent of healthcare worker infections in the first wave were likely acquired at work, increasing in the second wave to at least 69 per cent.

The research found the leading causes included cases being 'cohorted' in the same clinical space, contact between health workers in areas like tea and break rooms, gaps in putting on and taking off PPE, movement of staff between facilities and older ventilation systems being less effective at ensuring good air flow.

The Royal Melbourne Hospital has recently reduced its cohorting of positive cases in the same clinical space with good outcomes – challenging much of the previous international understanding around treating coronavirus.

While it's pleasing that the rate of healthcare worker infection is trending down, any healthcare worker contracting this virus at work is a concern. That's why the Taskforce was established and will continue to undertake further work, making sure we delve further into what might be driving these numbers and what more needs to be done.

As part of the Taskforce's initial recommendations, the Government will work with relevant stakeholders to assess every single health service, aged care facility, Aboriginal health organisation and GP clinic to ensure that these workplaces are COVIDSafe, including additional random spot-checks.

To help investigate the impact of fit testing on healthcare worker infection rates, a trial will be overseen by the Taskforce and will commence at Northern Health. The Taskforce will review the trial and provide recommendations on any further expansions.

Recognising new and emerging evidence regarding aerosol spread, the Victorian Health and Human Services Building Authority will also undertake a COVID Aerosol Hot Spot Analysis Study to identify potential 'hot spots' in clinical spaces caused by aerosols coming to rest on surfaces.

This study will model aerosol behaviour, tracking particles as they are carried via airstreams and onto surfaces – potentially uncovering new evidence and insights for our own healthcare settings and settings around the world.

And recognising the complicated process and infectious nature of this virus, 'PPE spotters' will be deployed in hospitals to ensure accurate donning and doffing for workers entering and leaving COVID-19 environments.

WorkCover claims are also being fast-tracked to ensure no healthcare worker who contracts the virus at work is left on their own, with all claims being assessed within an average of 48 hours.

Guidance on using N95 respirators has been expanded to be the broadest in Australia, increasing their usage from 50,000 to 800,000 per week. Further work will be undertaken on the use of N95 respirators and updated across non-hospital workforces.

This is in addition to ongoing work being undertaken by Primary Health Networks (PHNs), Professional Colleges, the Australian Medical Association (AMA), and the Commonwealth and Victorian governments to provide infection control advice and resources to GPs, including running webinars, online training videos, practice guides and health professional specific advice lines.

For more information about the Victorian Government's efforts to reduce coronavirus infections in healthcare workers visit www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus.

Quotes attributable to Premier Daniel Andrews

"Our health heroes take care of us – and we need to take care of them. This work further demonstrates the wildy infectious nature of this virus and the need to do everything we can to stop its spread."

"My message to every healthcare worker is – if you get coronavirus at work, put in a WorkCover claim straightaway. It'll be fast-tracked and we'll get you the support you need."

Quotes attributable to Minister for Health Jenny Mikakos

"We know that healthcare workers are more likely to come into contact with this virus by virtue of where they work – but we don't have to accept this as an inevitable part of their job."

"We don't want any healthcare worker being infected and that's why we are continuing to update the advice and support we are providing to maximise their protection."