

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Written Question on Notice - 10 July 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000391

Question Subject: Studies regarding wearing masks in public:

Written

Senator: Jacqui Lambie

Question:

What epidemiological studies did the Department of Health rely on when the decision was made not to recommend the wearing of masks in public?

Answer:

The Infection Control Expert Group (ICEG) provides expert advice and information to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) to support best practice related infection prevention and control. The ICEG membership is comprised of infection prevention and control practitioners, specialist microbiologists, and infectious diseases physicians.

ICEG undertook a literature review on the use of masks and respirators in the context of COVID-19. This was published on the Department of Health website on 26 May 2020 (available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/the-use-of-face-masks-and-respirators-in-the-context-of-covid-19>). The literature review provides general considerations, scientific evidence, and recommendations for the use of masks and respirators in the context of COVID-19. ICEG regularly reviews emerging published evidence as well as real time epidemiological and clinical evidence (both local and international) around wearing masks in the community and makes recommendations to the AHPPC.

The AHPPC has considered the role of wearing masks in public as one of a range of precautions to reduce transmission of COVID-19. The AHPPC has recommended that when there is no community transmission of COVID-19, there is likely to be no benefit from wearing a mask in public. In regions with significant community transmission, wearing a mask can provide an extra layer of protection, especially in situations where it is difficult to practice physical distancing, such as when using public transport.

The advice from the AHPPC on masks in the community has not changed throughout the pandemic; however, the epidemiological situation in some jurisdictions has.

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Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Written questions received 10 July 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000392

Question subject: ABC open letter to WHO on micro-droplets that travel through the air spreading coronavirus

Question Type: Written

Senator: Jacqui Lambie

Question:

The ABC reports that more than 200 scientists have written an open letter to the WHO, calling on the organisation to recognise the potential for coronavirus to spread through micro-droplets that travel through the air (ABC, 'Coronavirus spreads through the air as aerosol, 230 scientists write in open letter to World Health Organization', 7 July 2020). In light of this, or any other evidence, is the Department reviewing the decision not to recommend mask-wearing in public?

Answer:

With any respiratory virus, tiny particles containing respiratory virus can be expelled from the mouth during coughing or sneezing. Laboratory studies have demonstrated small airborne particles suspended in the air can contain the virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2). The relevance of this in the transmission of COVID-19 is unclear. Overwhelmingly, evidence suggests the vast majority of COVID-19 spread is through direct contact and larger droplets rather than through aerosolisation. The reproduction number for COVID-19 rarely exceeds 2.5 which should be contrasted with communicable diseases with demonstrable airborne transmission such as measles, varicella, and tuberculosis which have significantly higher reproduction numbers.

The Infection Control Expert Group regularly considers available evidence on the wearing of masks in the community and provides advice to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC). Advice about wearing masks in the community has been the same since the pandemic began: it is not generally recommended. In most states and territories, the chance of coming into contact with someone with COVID-19 is low.

In regions where there is community transmission occurring, such as currently in Victoria, a mask can provide some extra protection in circumstances where physical distancing is difficult to maintain (e.g. on public transport). The main value of wearing a mask is to protect other people if the person wearing the mask is unknowingly infected with the virus. For people at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g. older people or those with a chronic illness), physical distancing is most important. In situations where physical distance cannot be maintained, wearing a mask is an important protective measure.

For people who choose to wear a mask, it is important to wear it properly. Directions on the correct use of masks should be followed.

The AHPPC is continuing to monitor emerging evidence regarding the potential for airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2. The AHPPC will review its advice on the wearing of masks in the community if new evidence comes to light.

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Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

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Written question received 10 July 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000393

Question Subject: Current health advice on wearing masks from Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) , National COVID-19 Health and Research Advisory Committee (NCHRAC) or the Infection Control Expert Group (ICEG):

Question Type: Written

Senator: Jacqui Lambie

Question:

Have any of the members of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), National COVID-19 Health and Research Advisory Committee (NCHRAC) or the Infection Control Expert Group (ICEG) made representations to the Minister, the Department, or the CMO to change the current health advice on the wearing of masks?

Answer:

The agreed advice from the AHPPC, NCHRAC and the ICEG has remained consistent throughout this pandemic. In areas of low community transmission, the wearing of a mask is not generally recommended. However, if you are in a region where community transmission is occurring, there should be extra precautions taken if it is difficult to maintain physical distancing. This may include wearing a face mask.

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Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

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Written question received 10 July 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000394

Question subject: The Lancet study

Question type: Written

Senator: Jacqui Lambie

Question:

According to a study in The Lancet ([link](#)) wearing masks in enclosed indoor spaces, on public transport and in mass outdoor gatherings can significantly reduce community transmission by up to 70% (Chu et al., 2020, 'Physical distancing, face masks, and eye protection to prevent person-to-person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: a systematic review and meta-analysis', The Lancet, Vol 395, No. 10242, pp. 1973-1987, June 27, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31142-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31142-9)).

- a. On balance with other available evidence, does this study suggest that Australians should wear masks in public, to prevent the spread of COVID-19?
- b. If not, why not?

Answer:

The systematic review and meta-analysis by Chu et al, published in The Lancet on 27 June 2020, provides some evidence that wearing face masks can reduce transmission in some situations. However, these results cannot reasonably be extrapolated to all Australian communities at the present time. The majority of studies included in the analysis relate to the use of masks in health care, or in high-risk community settings (such as household contacts or close contacts of a confirmed case). The study concludes the optimum use of face masks may depend on contextual factors. This is consistent with advice from the Infection Control Expert Group (ICEG) which indicates mask-wearing is not generally recommended in most states and territories, when community transmission is low or absent.

In regions where there is community transmission occurring, a mask can provide some extra protection in circumstances where physical distancing is difficult to maintain (e.g. on public

transport). The main value of wearing a mask is to protect other people if the person wearing the mask is unknowingly infected with the virus. For people at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g. older people or those with a chronic illness), physical distancing is most important. In situations where physical distance cannot be maintained, wearing a mask is an important protective measure.

For people who choose to wear a mask it is important to wear it properly. Directions on the correct use of masks should be followed.

The ICEG regularly considers available evidence on the wearing of masks in the community and provides advice to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee. The current advice from ICEG on wearing of masks in the community is based on the current situation of low community transmission in most areas, and is continually reviewed as the local Australian epidemiology of the infection changes.

The scale of community transmission currently in Victoria is materially different from any other time in the Australian context and does justify the widespread wearing of masks in public spaces.

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PDR Number: IQ20-000396

National Stockpile - P2/N95

Written

Senator: Jacqui Lambie

Question:

Can the Department please provide the committee with numbers of P2/N95 masks and surgical masks in the national stockpile?

Answer:

As at 28 July 2020, the numbers of masks in the National Medical Stockpile are:

- P2/N95 Respirators – **63,796,410**
- Surgical (face) masks - **273,374,080**