

## Senate Select Committee on COVID-19: 26 May hearings

### Ms Caroline Edwards – Opening Statement

- Thank you for the invitation to provide further information about the Department of Health's involvement in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- I would like to start by briefly updating the committee on this issues I expect to be the subject of questions today namely arrangements to protect and assist residents in aged care facilities and recent mental health initiatives put in place in response to the pandemic. In addition, Professor Murphy has prepared a short statement of the current epidemiology of COVID in Australia.
- First to **aged care**. Older Australians, particularly those in residential aged care homes, are among our most vulnerable community members, and are more at risk of severe disease from COVID-19 infection than other Australians. In fact, the median age of deaths in Australia is 80 years.
- A key consideration in developing and implementing the national response to COVID-19 has been how to best shield older Australians from infection.
- Australia's whole of population measures and border controls have been critical in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and, combined with targeted measures to reduce the risk of exposure in the over 60 age group, particularly in residential aged care, have limited the impact on this highly vulnerable cohort in comparison with other countries.
- For example in Norway, 60% of deaths have occurred in aged care facilities, Canada 62%, Ireland 60%, Spain 67%, France 51% and Belgium 53%. In Australia, our current data equates to 29% of deaths. Of course every one of these cases is a tragedy and our condolences go to their families.
- Specific measures to protect and assist people living in residential aged care include:
  - infection control guidance and freely available training for the aged care workforce; visitation restrictions combined with guidance to enable residents to remain safely connected to their family and community; rapid provision of PPE, clinical expertise, and additional skilled workforce; in-reach pathology testing, and access to telehealth to ensure residents continue to safely receive needed healthcare.
- The Australian Government has committed more than \$850 million in specific funding to support our older Australians during the pandemic, including:
  - \$101.2 million for infection control training and education of the aged care workforce, and provision of additional workers, including nurses;
  - \$444.6 million to support aged care workforce continuity, including a retention bonus;
  - \$10 million for the Community Visitors Scheme;
  - \$59.3 million for the delivery of meals and groceries to older people who are self-isolating;

- \$205 million to supplement residential aged care; and
  - \$47.8 million for the extension of the Business Improvement Fund.
- Officers with me today will be able to discuss these measures in detail with the Committee.
- Now I would like to turn to **mental health**. It is clear that the pandemic is taking a toll on many peoples' mental health. We have a compounding situation, where fears about the virus are heightened by the need for social distancing and physical isolation and magnified further when people lose their jobs, see their incomes fall or worry about the longer term impact of the crisis on our economy. We know that it is critically important that we take extra care of peoples' mental health at this time.
- Since 30 January the Australian Government has invested approximately \$500 million in preventative mental health and suicide prevention.
- In addition, a significant proportion of the \$669 million telehealth package has enabled GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to provide services remotely.
- The preventative mental health package in response to COVID-19 was announced by the Prime Minister on 29 March. At a cost of \$74 million it has funded the establishment of a 24x7 phone counselling service led by Beyond Blue and staffed by accredited mental health professionals. It also provided additional funds for other critical phone and online support services, such as Lifeline and Kids Helpline. It is also funding the development of mental health resources for expecting and new parents and for First Nations peoples, among others.
- This package has also funded a dedicated mental health and wellbeing program for frontline health workers led by the Black Dog Institute, provided online and by phone so our busy frontline workers have access support when and where they need it. The government has also committed to a public education campaign cutting across traditional advertising and social media, to raise awareness about mental health and the importance of seeking help.
- More recently, on 15 May, National Cabinet endorsed the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan. The Plan provides for coordinated action by all Australian governments based around key principles, priorities and actions.
- The Australian Government is contributing \$48.1 million towards initiatives consistent with these principles, priorities and actions. It focuses on improving access to services and pathways of care, and strengthening the mental health system including the mental health workforce and governance arrangements.
- Again the relevant officers are in attendance to assist with the Committee's questions.