

## Guidance for occupational physicians providing advice on COVID-19

**Disclaimer:** The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is an evolving situation. Health professionals should refer to the advice provided by the Australian Government Department of Health and the Aotearoa New Zealand Government Ministry of Health in the first instance.

### Purpose

This document seeks to provide guidance to occupational and environmental physicians and trainees who are advising workplaces on COVID-19. It also provides links to trusted resources on COVID-19.

This information may also be useful to other health professionals and employers themselves.

### Employers' Duty of Care

Businesses and organisations have an important part to play in reducing the rate of transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace and in the community. Minimising the exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace and early intervention for suspected cases will complement public health measures while reducing disruption to business.

#### 1. Prioritising the health and wellbeing of workers and their families

- The health of workers, their families and the general public is paramount to the COVID-19 pandemic response.
- However, it is important that businesses clearly understand their role (if any) in the provision of essential services and clarify risks arising for workers and how they will be mitigated.

#### 2. Showing leadership

- The responsibility for each workplace's COVID-19 response should rest at the highest level of the organisation, on the same terms as their other duty of care obligations.
- It also requires clear senior leadership in both the Human Resources (HR) and Communication functions of the organisation.
- Exercising that responsibility and leadership will entail applying timely and accurate health advice from trusted sources such as those listed at the end of this document for an extended period (at least six months).

#### 3. Effective two-way communication between employers and workers

- Workers need information and direction regarding actions their employer is taking to safeguard their health, while employers need to be aware of their employees' workplace and related domestic concerns (for example: childcare, other caring responsibilities).
- Employers need to be aware that business as usual may not be possible during this time and workers and employers need to work collaboratively and think outside of normal practices to solve some of the problems that are going to arise. HR managers need to be actively involved in working to identify solutions that work for the business's particular circumstances to maintain business continuity as far as feasible.
- The rapid evolution of health advice means that maintaining two-way communication between employers and workers will be an ongoing and dynamic process for an extended period.
- It is essential that employers do not expect that their workers will have necessarily understood the key messages from official sources (listed at the end of this document). Workers may be confused by conflicting and perhaps false social media advice. This means employers should reinforce key messages from official sources at work.
- Communication and workplace policy and processes should acknowledge the potential for workers' mental health and wellbeing to be affected during the pandemic. This may include, but is not limited to, factors such as employment uncertainty, economic impacts, misinformation, and fear. The [Beyond Blue website](#) is a valuable resource and includes some specific advice on how to look after mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.
- Whilst acknowledging that the current situation presents its unique challenges, it is important for employers to maintain privacy and confidentiality in sensitive communications with employees.

#### 4. Showing empathy and compassion

- The actual level of threat posed by COVID-19, combined with uncertainty and misinformation, has led to many workers being in a state of fear.
- It is essential that employers recognise that workers and their families may be coping with many different situations, which may include the threat to their elderly and other at-risk loved ones, school closures, childcare issues, coping with caring for family members should they become ill, and even bereavement following deaths at home or among their workmates.
- It will be essential during the pandemic that workers know that their employer continues to care for their personal circumstances and wellbeing: the challenge will be doing so without being unnecessarily intrusive and ensuring that privacy and confidentiality are maintained.

#### 5. Applying innovative thinking

- The key strategies being applied in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are social and physical distancing (for example, limiting contact between people, and prohibiting gatherings of people as well as enhanced hygiene protocols such as handwashing and enhanced cleaning of desks, telephones and keyboards) and self-isolation (i.e. staying at home only with people who usually live in the home, not going to public places including work, school, childcare, university or public gatherings and not seeing visitors). Further information about these strategies is available from the official sources listed at the end of this document.
- Employers should consider applying innovative solutions that comply with the most current official advice, so that workers can continue to undertake their work roles as far as feasible whilst limiting contact with their colleagues and the general public as much as possible.
- This will be especially important for workplaces where options such as flexible working hours, working from home, or creative use of technology are not safe or feasible.
- For those workplaces where working from home is possible, employers need to provide adequate advice and support to their employees to enable them to set up ergonomic and properly equipped workspaces at home as far as feasible. Employers will also need to acknowledge that depending on employees' personal circumstances, working from home may impact on productivity and there may be an increased need for flexibility in working arrangements. It may be useful to develop a work from home WHS checklist and specifically include advice on the potential mental health impacts of isolation and advice on how to manage a team in a virtual environment.
- Examples where innovative thinking may be required pertains to the practical implementation of key control measures such as hand washing, use of sanitisers, no hand shaking, creative use of office space, only using tap and pay to avoid handling cash, and avoiding 'clusters' of people at work.

#### 6. Being responsive to the evolving situation

- As the information on the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to evolve rapidly, the organisation's senior leadership should assign specific responsibility to a dedicated individual or working group to regularly monitor the nation-specific advice from trusted official sources listed at the end of this document.
- It is recommended that the application of the information as it evolves should be based on occupational health and safety [hierarchy of controls](#), as for any other workplace hazard, as far as possible using existing policies and processes.
- As specialist doctors in the health and wellbeing of workers and the working age population more broadly, occupational physicians are well placed to assist. For example, undertaking worksite visits and incorporating them into each employer's COVID-19 response will often be very useful in helping them to provide employers with targeted workplace-specific advice.

#### 7. Planning ahead

- Businesses need to continue to ensure the health and safety of their workers in this changing environment as we anticipate this disruption will last for a significant period.
- While this pandemic is an example of widespread disruption, people around the world are already starting to identify new ways of doing business, and new ways of working.
- Employers need to focus on what their future business might look like, and how to ensure that, together with their workers and the nation more broadly, they can survive and thrive once the pandemic ends.
- [AFOEM's initiative on the health benefits of good work and its associated resources](#) can assist employers in creating work environments and conditions that are beneficial to the health and wellbeing of their employees during this challenging time

### **Authority**

The information has been provided by specialist occupational and environmental physicians from the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM) of The Royal Australian College of Physicians (RACP). The advice has been reviewed and endorsed by the COVID-19 Expert Clinical Reference Group of the RACP which includes specialists in infectious disease, respiratory medicine, geriatrics, public health and occupational and environmental medicine.

### **Feedback**

Comments, questions or feedback may be emailed to [afoem@racp.edu.au](mailto:afoem@racp.edu.au). Please include the word COVID-19 in the subject line of any emails.

It is important to access timely and accurate health advice from trusted sources such as those listed below.

### **Trusted sources of information on COVID-19**

***In Australia, call the Australian Government's Coronavirus Health Information Line if you are seeking information on coronavirus (COVID-19). The line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week: 1800 020 080.***

***In Aotearoa New Zealand, call the Aotearoa New Zealand Government's Healthline team (for free) on 0800 358 5453 or +64 9 358 5453 for international SIMS for COVID-19 health advice and information.***

### **Telemedicine consultations for occupational and environmental physicians**

In Australia, telemedicine items are now available for patients with coronavirus infections for both general practitioners and specialists as well as for non-coronavirus related consultations for selected vulnerable patients and clinicians. Referrals will be required for patients to obtain Medicare rebates for telemedicine items as is required for usual consultations with specialists. However eligibility is rapidly changing so we recommend consulting the MBS website: <http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/news-2020-03-01-latest-news-March> for further updates.

### **Australia-specific**

The Australian Department of Health website:

- The central resource that informs all official public health advice in Australia is found at <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdna-song-novel-coronavirus.htm> It includes suspect and case definitions, close contact definition, contact management recommendations, and current release from isolation criteria.
- Coronavirus (COVID-19) health alert. This page includes information about how the Australian Government is monitoring and responding to the outbreak, how you can help slow the spread of COVID-19 in Australia, and what to do if you have symptoms. It also includes the latest official medical advice and case numbers: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert>
- Coronavirus COVID-19 resources. This page includes a fact sheet for employers: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources%E>

Fair Work Ombudsman webpage: This page provides advice on Coronavirus and Australian workplace laws: <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/news-and-media-releases/website-news/coronavirus-and-australian-workplace-laws#health-and-safety-information>

Safe Work Australia Coronavirus (COVID-19): This page provides guidance for businesses as well as some useful links to advice from state or territory government agencies, including health departments and WHS regulators: <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/coronavirus-COVID-19-advice-pcbus>

Official travel advice for Australians: <https://www.smarttraveller.gov.au/news-and-updates/coronavirus-COVID-19>

### **Aotearoa New Zealand-specific**

Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Health official advice: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/COVID-19-novel-coronavirus>

Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment Aotearoa New Zealand – Workplace guidance for employers and employees on COVID-19: <https://www.employment.govt.nz/about/news-and-updates/workplace-response-coronavirus-COVID-19/>

Aotearoa New Zealand Worksafe website – information about Workplace preparedness for novel coronavirus (COVID-19): <https://worksafe.govt.nz/managing-health-and-safety/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/workplace-preparedness-for-novel-coronavirus>

Official travel advice for Aotearoa New Zealanders: <https://www.safetravel.govt.nz/>

#### **Other**

##### **TSANZ & ANZSRS recommendation - Suspension of lung function testing**

<https://www.thoracic.org.au/documents/item/1864>

##### **Beyond Blue – Advice on looking after mental health during the coronavirus outbreak**

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>

##### **The World Health Organization (WHO)**

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak webpage: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

Information sheet – Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19: [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-COVID-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7\\_6](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-COVID-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7_6)

##### **U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration – Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19**

Although US-centric, this document includes guiding principles which can be helpful to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

[https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf?deliveryName=USCDC-10\\_4-DM23416&deliveryName=FCP\\_2\\_USCDC-10\\_4-DM23416](https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf?deliveryName=USCDC-10_4-DM23416&deliveryName=FCP_2_USCDC-10_4-DM23416)

##### **Current status of the COVID-19 pandemic**

The John Hopkins University provides a real-time world-wide status for the pandemic at

<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.