

Open access to RATs makes most sense for the health off all

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Rapid antigen testing kits should be universally available to all people in Australia who need them, the Consumers Health Forum said today.

“We welcome plans for provision of up to 10 free tests for concession and health care card holders through community pharmacy - this is a critical and overdue essential measure,” the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said today.

“But to limit free RATs to these groups would be a denial of the universal principles underlying Medicare which have worked so well over the past three decades.

“Fortunately, it appears that state governments in future weeks will make RATs freely available but the chaotic interstate patchwork of pandemic measures makes yet more compelling the case for a Commonwealth-directed and organised response.

“The use of the community pharmacy network for free RATs access in addition to state clinics is sensible. Consumers will benefit from public education pharmacists are well-placed to provide about whether they actually need a test or not.

“The community catch-cry is clear: following the time-held principles underpinning our Medicare and PBS system, RATs should be universally available for those who need them.

“While the measures announced by the Prime Minister yesterday are welcome coverage for the 6.6 million people deemed eligible, it will still

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mean millions of others will struggle to afford the rapid tests they will need.

“Priority need should be the determinant of access not ability to pay; RATs tests need to be as freely available as PCR was --- the same as applied to other critical public health measures such as free bowel cancer screening kits.

“There are many people on low incomes who do not qualify for a health care card who nonetheless will struggle to afford a RAT they might require for work purposes or before visiting vulnerable relatives and friends.

“The National Cabinet decision to make RATs available for health care and related card holders is welcome but we need a wider approach given RATs are now such a central part of our COVID armoury. The RATs will become even more a routine part of public health services given the latest measures announced to replace the PCR tests with RATs in many cases.

“The announcement of tougher measures to counter the widespread price-gouging of RATs is also a positive step but something that should have been already in place.

“In the absence of free access for all, we welcome the penalties to be imposed to limit price gouging similar to steps taken to limit price inflation of essential goods such as masks, PPE and sanitiser earlier in the pandemic

“It’s also essential that we have an efficient and effective RATs access and distribution strategy that combats community confusion about testing and that includes a clear, and consistent message about when you need to be tested.

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“We recognise the need to discourage unnecessary testing but much of the demand for tests was in line with the government requirements and medical messaging. It is hardly as if people were queuing for hours for tests out of some desire to rip off the system.

“The free, private market was never going to ensure effective access for all who need it. Those with the least capacity and health literacy to actually seek tests will miss out. The fact that ACCC has launched its review of price gouging and associated issues is clear recognition of this.

“As all experience both here and abroad has shown us, the best counter to the pandemic on both economic and health grounds is making public health defence measures available to all,” Ms Wells said.

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