

Australian healthcare consumers want to see real action taken to better protect Australia from future pandemics

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All governments and health bureaucracies must learn the lessons from Australia's response to COVID-19 and prepare Australia for the next pandemic, says CEO of Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) Dr Elizabeth Deveny.

Dr Deveny's comments come after the Australian Government released the COVID-19 Response Inquiry Report.

The report makes recommendations that will help Australia prepare the best it can for the next global pandemic. The recommendations range from how to minimise harm, planning and preparedness, state and national leadership, the need for data and evidence in decision making and how to restore both equity and trust with the public.

"While we welcome the report and its recommendations, we are very mindful that we need to see real meaningful action taken by governments to implement the report's recommendations, if that doesn't happen then it will just be another well-meaning report which sits on a shelf.

"I'm really concerned that if that does happen it could result in further loss of life and livelihood due to a failure in not implementing the solutions to the issues outlined in this report," said Dr Deveny.

Dr Deveny said that Australians during the peak of COVID-19 were asked to do incredible things and sacrifice their way of life to help keep themselves and their wider communities safe and that this effort required governments to commit to action.

“I was very concerned when I saw the comments in the report saying that Australia is not prepared for the next pandemic and could be seen as being in a worse position than we were at the start of 2020 with COVID. I think that a lot of Australians will be really worried by that and want governments at all levels do what they can to best prepare Australia for the next pandemic,” said Dr Deveny.

The report also found that Australians’ trust has been eroded in government and in vaccines. CHF acknowledges that this has been the reality for some time now and is very supportive of the report's recommendations to restore the public’s trust and confidence in government and vaccinations.

“We have very obviously seen a rise in vaccine hesitancy in the community linked with COVID-19. There actually can be very valid reasons for people being vaccine hesitant, including people wanting to know more about the risks and benefits before being immunised and any potential side effects.

"This isn't unreasonable, and I think what this shows is that governments and health systems really do need to do more public health education about all types of medications, including vaccines, to counter misinformation and to also help alleviate people’s concerns,” said Dr Deveny.

The public being less accepting of pandemic response measures like social distancing, lockdowns and vaccine mandates are also a key finding of the report.

“We absolutely recognise that public trust has been frayed through the COVID-19 process which will lead to resistance to future pandemic measures as well as potentially other health advice. But we need to remember that for people who have chronic or high-risk health conditions, they will likely comply with future measures, so they stay alive. Protecting high risk Australians during future pandemics must be front and center in any government response.

“Frankly I don’t think it’s good enough for governments to say, ‘well putting in any protection measures will be too hard to do’ is good enough, particularly if that means more people become seriously ill or die as a result. We need a nuanced response to any future protection measures,” said Dr Deveny.

Dr Deveny said that it’s important to remember that people are still getting really sick and are still dying because of COVID-19, so the report can’t be seen as a signal that the threat of COVID-19 is over.

CHF is pleased that the report recognises the efforts of the previous Federal Government, who at the time, had to take extreme measures to keep people safe, but it is obvious that as the pandemic response went on, some things could have been done better.

“The report shows that there is clear need for decisions to be made based on data and evidence and for that evidence to be shared and explained with the public as reasoning for a decision in a way that the public can understand.

“This is a significant finding and something that needs to be implemented today so Australians can better understand the health decisions governments and bureaucrats make in the way their health systems function. We don’t need to wait for the next pandemic to come for this to happen. We will all benefit through this,” said Dr Deveny.

Dr Deveny also said that Australia's peak consumer and community health organisations have and will continue to play a vital role in helping governments understand what communities want to know about during a time of health crisis or pandemic and how that information is best communicated.

In response to the report, the Australian Government announced the permanent establishment of an independent Centre for Disease Control (CDC). The Government has pledged \$251 million to establish the CDC which will start operations on 1 January 2026, pending passage of legislation through parliament. Australia is the only OECD country without a CDC equivalent.

“CHF welcomes the permanent establishment of an independent CDC which could help address the issues and recommendations raised in the report.

We need the CDC to be grounded in consumer engagement and we must see consumers being involved in the next stages of design and scope of work of the Centre,” said Dr Deveny.

CHF stands ready to work with the Australian Government in the roll out of the report’s recommendations and the establishment of the CDC so the voices of Australian healthcare consumers are heard and acted on in any future pandemic.

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