

Australian Government releases face masks to protect against coronavirus



The Australian Federal Government has released 500 000 protective masks to general practitioners (GPs) and other health workers across the country to protect them from infection by the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) following an appeal by the Royal Australian College of GPs (RACGP). The college president, Dr Harry Nespolon, made the appeal because of the shortage of protective masks available to health-care workers due to the recent bushfire crisis engulfing the country.

"This week I urged Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt to make the emergency medical mask stockpile available to GP clinics", Nespolon told *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. "It is great news that the Government has heeded that advice and acted swiftly to make these masks available to clinics nationwide, including those affected by the bushfires."

The masks will be available to both frontline staff in clinics and patients suspected of having symptoms of 2019-nCoV infection. "The masks won't have to be worn routinely, instead GPs and staff should make sensible decisions about when to wear them", says Nespolon. "The RACGP has suggested patients should call ahead to clinics and warn of their symptoms if they have been in China or had close contact with someone who has been in China. In those circumstances it would make sense to wear the masks when the person presents for their consultation."

The masks made available are the N95 respirator type, which prevent 95% of small particles, including pathogens from entering the nose and mouth. "I would recommend to all GPs and clinic staff that they make full use of their personal protective equipment, wash their hands as often as possible,

and ask if patients showing symptoms of coronavirus have travelled recently, and if so, where. It's also worth asking if they have had contact with someone who has been in China."

An Australian Federal Health Department spokesperson confirmed to *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* that the first 500 000 masks had already been delivered to primary health networks across all states and territories, with a further 500 000 to be made available if required. "These masks are not for distribution to the general public but rather to GPs, health workers, and high-risk patients", he added. The Federal Government has also procured additional masks to top up its national stockpile of 12 million N95 type masks, with a further 8 million surgical masks also in storage.

Tony Kirby



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