

I am making this submission to Australia's COVID-19 Response Inquiry, offering a perspective on the measures taken by the Federal Government during the pandemic, including the roles and responsibilities of government, the key health response measures implemented during the pandemic, the broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19 and lockdowns, and the financial support offered to individuals, industry and businesses.

1. Governance

1. It is important, from the outset, to commend all levels of government in Australia for their swift declaration of a public health emergency. This decisive action, which facilitated the implementation of widespread restrictions on individual liberties and freedoms, was a necessary and proportionate measure to manage the spread of the highly lethal SARS-CoV-2 virus; to “flatten the curve” of COVID-19 serious illness leading to hospitalisation; and ensure that Australia would not experience an even greater crisis of excess mortality in future years. While some may argue that these restrictions were disproportionate and infringed the most vital personal freedoms, it is important to acknowledge the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, serving also as a reminder of the government's prime mandate: to spare Australians from COVID-19 mortality above all other competing objectives.

2. Key health response measures

2. The Australian Federal Government's role in sourcing and approving COVID-19 vaccines has been exemplary, showcasing a commitment to public health, safety and transparency. The government's prompt action in securing vaccine deals and expediting of the testing and approval processes, reflected a necessary urgency in response to the global health crisis. Whilst the real-world effectiveness of these vaccines in Australia has been a subject of debate because of “breakthrough” infections; their limited duration of protection; their limited to no effect on SARS-CoV-2 transmission; their limited effectiveness against variants; and, their significant but rare risk profile, it is crucial to acknowledge that these vaccines have significantly reduced the severity of COVID-19 cases, leading to lower hospitalisation and mortality rates.¹ Despite Australia's soaring and persistent excess and COVID-19 mortality since the vaccination rollout, these vaccines mitigated the strain on the healthcare system which is evidently now fully recovered. The vaccines protected the most vulnerable populations - the aged, comorbid and immunocompromised - underscoring their value. Without these vaccines, it could have been so much worse.
3. The government's reliance on expert advice for vaccine approval, despite criticisms of potential biases or conflicts of interest, demonstrated a trust in scientific expertise and established regulatory processes, even those beyond Australia's borders. This approach, while overlooking alternative viewpoints or contrary emerging data, ensured a streamlined and efficient vaccine rollout and a consistent, unwavering narrative of the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines to ensure continued vaccination uptake. The achievement of COVID-19 vaccination objectives facilitated our emergence from brutal and oppressive lockdowns, thereby paving the way out of the pandemic for the nation.
4. While critics may highlight the expense incurred in procuring vaccines that ultimately went unused and had to be disbanded, it's important to consider the context of uncertainty during the pandemic. The government's decision to purchase many surplus vaccines per person in the population, though resulting in extensive wastage, was a necessary step to ensure vaccine availability for all Australians. This proactive strategy, albeit costly to the taxpayer, was preferable to facing a shortage in the face of a rapidly evolving public health crisis. The disposal of these vaccines, therefore, while not ideal, was a necessary price to pay for ensuring the nation's preparedness and safety. Additionally, by investing heavily in vaccines, the government contributed to a broader economic ecosystem that incentivises innovation, motivating the pharmaceutical industry to undertake rapid and groundbreaking research,

¹ Liu, B., Gidding, H., Stepien, S., Cretikos, M., & Macartney, K. (2022). Relative effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination with 3 compared to 2 doses against SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.529 (Omicron) among an Australian population with low prior rates of SARS-CoV-2 infection. *Vaccine*, 40(43), 6288–6294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2022.09.029>

especially in times of global health emergencies. This transfer of public funds, though substantial, can be seen as an investment in future medical advancements, to support public health for future pandemics when, not if, they occur.

5. The Federal Government's sizeable investment was supported by providing indemnity to vaccine manufacturers against claims related to vaccine injuries. In doing so, the government effectively removed a significant barrier to rapid vaccine development and distribution. This indemnity was crucial in ensuring that pharmaceutical companies could focus on innovation and production without the threat of legal repercussions when their products caused injury or death. It is imperative that the risks and benefits of public health interventions should be shared societally, not by private or corporate interests. This approach, while perhaps controversial, ensures that pharmaceutical companies can continue their groundbreaking work in vaccine development using novel technologies like mRNA, which has become a necessity for addressing not just the current pandemic but the future one when it will occur.

3. Broader health supports for people impacted by COVID-19 and/or lockdowns (for example mental health and suicide prevention supports, and access to screening and other preventive health measures)

6. The rigorous enforcement of lockdowns, a key strategy in Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, merits recognition for its effectiveness in significantly reducing the spread of the virus and ensuring that Australia's soaring excess mortality would not be even greater. This decisive action, while primarily focused on an immediate and unseen threat, led to a necessary shift in healthcare priorities. As the healthcare system concentrated its efforts on managing the pandemic, routine screenings and preventive health measures, which play a crucial role in managing chronic and life-threatening conditions, experienced a temporary deprioritisation. While record rates of excess mortality for conditions like cancer, dementia, and diabetes is concerning, we know that it could have been so much worse without the exclusive focus on COVID-19 mortality guiding our public health emergency policies. The measures implemented, particularly the lockdowns, were driven by the urgent need to prevent a surge in COVID-19 deaths. This goal was paramount, as the virus had the potential to cause widespread fatalities for all Australians, to overwhelm healthcare systems, and inflict long-lasting damage on communities and economies. In this context, the prioritisation of COVID-19 mortality prevention against all else was not only justified, but essential. When the next pandemic occurs, the Federal Government should similarly adopt a "zero-COVID" approach to ensure that "broader health supports" are strategically deprioritised, thereby focusing resources and efforts on mitigating the exceptionally greater threat posed by the novel pathogen.

5. Support for industry and businesses (for example responding to supply chain and transport issues, addressing labour shortages, and support for specific industries)

AND

6. Financial support for individuals (including income support payments)

7. While it is acknowledged that Australia is currently contending with rampant inflation, heightened cost of living pressures, a strained housing market and significant labour shortages across various industries, and, while it is also acknowledged that these impacts are largely and directly attributable to pandemic policies such as border closures, lockdowns, movement restrictions, vaccination mandates and isolation orders, these issues must be weighed against the potential consequences of a laissez-faire approach to the pandemic. These economic challenges, though substantial and likely long-lasting, pale in comparison to the possible outcomes had the virus been allowed to spread unchecked. Unprecedented market restrictions and loose fiscal policy were essential trade-offs in the management of the pandemic. SARS-CoV-2 was, and remains, a highly lethal virus capable of causing significant

death and devastation for all Australians. COVID-19 was and is an indiscriminate disease that kills all Australians irrespective of their demography, income, race, religion or health, and therefore, support for industry, businesses and individuals during the pandemic years was essential in the prevention of all-cause and COVID-19 mortality. When the next pandemic occurs, we need to create these important incentives for individuals and businesses to do the right thing and embrace all public health interventions as the necessary and only path. The ongoing and significant social and economic costs we might face are difficult, but necessary ones for us all to bear. In light of these considerations, it becomes imperative for future policy-making to strategically prioritise such significant expenditures against all other competing objectives.