PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

22 May 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000258

Question Subject: Wuhan flights in January 2020

Question Type: Written

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question:

The Department of Home Affairs has advised that 3,528 passengers arrived from Wuhan in the People's Republic of China between 1 January 2020 and 23 January 2020 inclusive. 233,980 passengers arrived from the People's Republic of China between 1 January 2020 and 31 January 2020. In retrospect was that initial response in dealing with flights from Wuhan and China adequate?

Answer:

The Department of Health activated the National Incident Room on 20 January 2020 in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China.

The Australian Government declared 'Human coronavirus with pandemic potential' a Listed Human Disease through legislative amendment on 21 January 2020. This amendment enabled the Australian Government to screen ill travellers for COVID-19 at the border. The Traveller with Illness Checklist was immediately updated to assist in assessing ill travellers for COVID-19.

Communications materials, including electronic signage and factsheets, were provided to international ports on 22 January 2020.

Biosecurity officers and NSW Health met direct flights from Wuhan, China from 23 January 2020. Passengers were provided with information regarding COVID-19 and were health screened by NSW Health. Only one direct flight from Wuhan landed in Australia before the Chinese Government put Wuhan city in lockdown on 23 January 2020. On 29 January 2020, based on advice from the Australia Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), travellers from Hubei province were required to quarantine in their home/accommodation for 14 days after arrival in Australia.

These measures were introduced prior to the World Health Organization declaring the COVID-19 outbreak to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020.

The first case of COVID-19 in Australia was confirmed on 25 January 2020 in a traveller who had been in the Hubei province in China. By 31 January 2020, there were nine confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Australia, eight of whom had recent travel to Wuhan. Travel restrictions were implemented from 1 February for travellers from mainland China, as directed by Government. On the same date, enhanced health screening was implemented at international ports for all travellers from mainland China.

The Department of Health and AHPPC were recommending and implementing measures in response to the most up-to-date international epidemiological information available at the time. Measures proportionate to the risk to Australia were implemented in response to COVID-19 in January 2020, and subsequently.