

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

**Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19
pandemic**

02 June 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000343

Question Subject: Impact of the US withdrawal from the WHO

Question Type: Spoken

Hansard Page number: 14

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question

Senator PATRICK: This is perhaps a more targeted question. What do you think the impact of the US withdrawal from the WHO will have on global efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ms Edwards: I'm not sure I can comment either on the detailed expertise of how the WHO works and the impact of the US's involvement with it or on the timing or expectation of how the US is going to proceed. I would really have to defer comments to my colleagues at the department of foreign affairs. But I'm happy to take the question on notice and confer with them and report back.

Senator PATRICK: Obviously your department interacts with a number of people who are working with the WHO and so, in that sense, your department will have at least some direct effect, even if it's from the loss of finances. Programs, no doubt, will be cut as a result of the US effectively withdrawing funding.

Ms Edwards: The way such an important country as the US interacts with the WHO will definitely have an impact on its operations, but I'm just not in a position to know what that impact will be and how it will affect us. I'm happy to take it on notice.

Answer:

As the largest funder of the World Health Organization (WHO) we anticipate there will be implications arising from the United States (US) announcement to withdraw. These implications will become clearer once the parameters of the announcement have been determined.

The US has indicated they will maintain existing funding for global health activity. Australia will continue to engage with the US on global health matters as they consider redirecting their funding.

The impacts of any changes to the funding of the WHO as a result of the US withdrawal will be reported through governing body meetings, with financial reports presented annually to the Executive Board, scheduled in January 2021.

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

02 June 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000346

Question Subject: Production for vaccines

Type of Question: Spoken

Hansard Page number: 15

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question:

Senator PATRICK: What is the department doing in terms of planning for production in the event that a vaccine is developed here in Australia or even overseas? What have we got standing by ready to go into production for vaccines?

Ms Edwards: I would have to take that on notice or we could take it up at a further hearing when I've got the right officers with that sort of expertise with me.

Senator PATRICK: Okay. Has the department developed any policies, plans or guidelines for the distribution of a vaccine, be it an indigenous sourced vaccine or international vaccine, once a vaccine has been developed? What would those broad guidelines be?

Ms Edwards: It has been a matter discussed, both within the department generally and with some of our partners who we talk to about vaccine development, but we don't have any guidelines or so on at this point. I'd expect that that would be the sort of thing we would get international collaboration and expert advice on, but it has not been put in place at this point. We've been very busy doing the COVID response and investing in people with vaccine expertise. But, again, I'll take that on notice in case someone in the Chief Medical Officer's group can assist.

Answer:

There are currently over 190 different COVID-19 vaccines in development around the world using vastly different vaccine technologies with differing manufacturing requirements.

Building on existing vaccine manufacturing capabilities, the Government is exploring all potential mechanisms for ensuring adequate global and domestic supply of any COVID-19 vaccine which becomes available.

The Australian Government is also considering the most appropriate approach to distribution of any vaccines.

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

02 June 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000348

Question Subject: Balgo point-of-care testing

Type of Question: Spoken

Hansard Page number: 26

Senator: Patrick Dodson

Question:

Senator DODSON: How many capsules would be available at Balgo for the point-of-care testing?

Ms Edwards: I think the senator is talking about cartridges?

Dr de Toca: We'll have to take that on notice. The cartridges are delivered fortnightly or monthly, depending on remoteness allocation. We are also making sure that we are prepositioning additional protective personal equipment and additional cartridges in key regional locations so that the RFDS or other aeromedical providers can rapidly deploy additional supplies if a first case is identified. That way the aeromedical retrieval team that effects the first evacuation of a confirmed case can also deploy additional PPE and additional cartridges to expand their capacity to help communities respond to the outbreak.

Answer:

The Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Balgo Health Clinic is one of the 83 sites participating in the Australian Government's rapid coronavirus (COVID-19) Remote Point of Care Testing Program for remote and rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

As at 4 June 2020, a total of 190 GeneXpert Xpress SARS-CoV-2 test cartridges have been sent to the Balgo Health Clinic for use on the Xpert platform (Cepheid). Patient testing commenced on 21 May 2020.

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

02 June 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000351

Question Subject: Whistleblowers

Type of Question: Spoken

Hansard Page number: 30

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question:

Senator PATRICK: Okay. I also have a concern that it was reported in the paper that someone at Macquarie University Hospital may have reported some unauthorised or improper elective surgery and that the whistleblower is being chased. Of course, the Commonwealth has very strong views on whistleblower protection. I imagine that possibly they're covered by either the corporations law, the new whistleblower legislation or, alternatively, state legislation. But is there anything the Commonwealth can do—noting that the Commonwealth provides money to Macquarie University Hospital—to make sure that we do not pursue people who blow the whistle on unauthorised conduct?

Ms Edwards: I'm not aware of that instance at all. I can certainly take it on notice to tell you what we're aware of, if anything, and I can also take on notice what the Commonwealth knows about the recourse for whistleblowers in circumstances such as that—if they existed, if you see what I mean. So I'm happy to come back to you with what we know but, again, I'm not aware of it at all.

Answer:

The Department of Health has no information of any complaint regarding a whistleblower being “chased” after reporting alleged unauthorised or improper elective surgery at Macquarie University Hospital, other than what has been reported in the media.

There are various laws that protect whistleblowers from actual or threatened reprisal action in certain circumstances. As the Department has no information on this matter, there is insufficient detail to assess whether any particular Commonwealth scheme would be enlivened.