

Chief Medical Officer, Professor Paul Kelly

Opening Statement

Senate Select Committee hearing

7 May 2021

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide you with a brief opening statement.

As Australia's Chief Medical Officer and Director of Human Biosecurity, my highest priority is to protect the health of the Australian population.

As we continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the advice I provide to the Australian Government and National Cabinet is squarely focused on keeping Australians as safe as possible until we are able to move into a post-pandemic world.

Central to this, since March last year, has been ensuring Australia's international borders are secure – and that we have robust quarantine arrangements in place.

The issues about which I provide advice are often complex—and my advice seeks to help governments weigh up the risks and benefits associated with decisions relating to these issues.

Throughout the pandemic, we have been dealing with incredibly difficult issues – and providing advice to the Australian Government and National Cabinet on decisions where there are significant risks – no matter what decision has ultimately been made.

This is the case with the recent advice I provided that informed the Australian Government's decision to implement a temporary pause on travellers from India entering Australian territory.

I believe the temporary pause was the right decision – weighing up all the risks and benefits.

Just to provide a bit of context, on 22 April, National Cabinet requested the Department of Health develop methodology for identifying COVID-19 high-risk countries to inform decision making in relation to passenger arrivals.

Using this agreed methodology, India has been determined to be a high-risk COVID-19 country in relation to passenger arrivals. This determination was based on the number of overseas travellers in quarantine in Australia who had acquired a COVID-19 infection in India.

The tragic reality is the number of COVID-19 cases continues to grow rapidly in India – and the situation will likely get worse before it gets better.

My heart goes out not only to the Indian population, but our Indian-Australian community, and the wider Australian population who have friends and loved ones in India. I know it is a desperately difficult time for you all.

Australia has provided emergency medical supplies, including ventilators, to help the Indian Government respond to the pandemic. We stand ready to offer further assistance if requested by

the Indian Government. At the same time, we are doing all we can to get Australians in India home as soon and as safely as possible.

The rapid increase in positive cases in quarantine among people returning from India caused significant concern in a number of jurisdictions, potentially stretching health systems and increasing the risk of quarantine breaches.

The pause in allowing travellers from India to enter Australia – and I stress it is temporary – will allow us to prepare additional arrangements to get Australians home without increasing risks here in Australia, which importantly includes ensuring that our public health system capacity is protected.

I am happy to take any questions committee members may have.

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