

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Ms Caroline Edwards – Opening Statement

Thank you for the invitation to address the Committee in relation to the Department of Health's involvement in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department has, and continues to work closely with other agencies across the Australian, and state and territory governments, on developing and implementing a comprehensive and coordinated response package.

Overview of the Health response

On 20 January 2020, Australia's National Incident Room was activated in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Shortly after this, the Department commenced providing advice to the public on COVID-19, including fact sheets, via its website.

In response to the events unfolding both nationally and internationally, on 30 January the Australian Health Protection Principle Committee, commenced daily meetings. This longstanding Committee, chaired by Professor Murphy and including all Chief Health Officers in every State and Territory, provides advice directly to governments and has been essential to determining our response measures.

At the same time, an unprecedented health response began roll-out from late February, following activation of the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for COVID-19.

On 11 March the Government announced a \$2.4 billion first phase health package:

- The package included investment across primary care, aged care, hospitals, research and the National Medical Stockpile.
- The investment also enabled communication activities aimed at providing practical and up to date advice to the public and the health sector.

Subsequent measures have included:

- Over \$1 billion in funding to support the mental health of Australians, bolster domestic violence services, further expand telehealth and ensure access to emergency food and essentials for vulnerable people, and secure additional stocks of personal protective equipment and other medical supplies and equipment.
- An additional \$444.6 million in support for the aged care sector.
- A \$1.3 billion guarantee to private hospitals, to secure 30,000 hospital beds and 105,000 nurses and other staff.

Summary

The Department has worked collectively with governments and the broader health and medical sector to support a rapid response to the virus.

The initiatives the Department is implementing, when combined with broader measures such as social distancing, border restrictions and strong messaging on good hygiene, has meant Australia is well placed in managing the virus.