

Pathology Technology Australia COVID-19 Activities and Achievements June 2020

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Pathology Technology Australia led and participated in multiple activities to increase awareness of the role our member companies play in healthcare delivery in Australia. We worked on behalf of members in many ways to achieve better outcomes.

Here are some examples.

- We are a leading supporter of the Continuity of Care Coalition which has played an essential role in raising awareness of people returning to their healthcare plans. The “Don’t Skip Your Test” program has had more than 35 million individual interactions and have led to a dramatic improvement in GP visits and pathology test requests.
- We have achieved mainstream TV, newsprint and digital media exposure as the peak body representing pathology technology suppliers.
- We completed an audit of the installed base of COVID-19 related testing platforms to assist in DoH planning for increased COVID-19 testing.
- Provided the DoH with a register of companies and contacts who provide COVID-19 related testing platforms and kits.
- Interacted with the office of the MoH and with senior officers of the DoH (including Ms Penny Shakespeare, Assistant Secretary and Dr Gary Lum, Principal Medical Adviser) and the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources (including Glenys Beauchamp, Assistant Secretary).
- We worked with the MTAA to provide input to the DoH on supply of COVID-19 related testing products.
- We worked with Dept of Home Affairs on interstate access for essential personnel and with AusTrade on alternate air-freight options for members importing essential supplies.
- Worked with TGA to have an accelerated assessment in place for COVID-19 test kits. TGA decided to go with an exemption strategy. We then worked with TGA to modify the wording of the exemption to include commercial pathology providers doing the tests.
- Worked with the DoH to have the wording of the COVID-19 PCR MBS item changed to remove the need for 2 tests. The original item descriptor mandated testing for other respiratory viruses and for COVID-19. This placed unnecessary strain on the already stretched supply chain for testing consumables.
- Communicated with the Biological Imports Division at DAWE in an attempt to gain accelerated entry for critical COVID-19 testing products.
- Our submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 was accepted by the committee and published on their web site.
- Our own website, social media and email updates have had our highest ever open and response rates. We published 8 podcasts and videocasts related to COVID-19 testing.
- We produced 3 position papers related to COVID-19 that were provided to government and media.

Here is more detail on some of these activities.

Member companies of Pathology Technology Australia worked very quickly to provide a comprehensive audit of the installed base of COVID-19 related testing platforms for;

- Nucleic acid tests, including RNA extraction systems and detection systems.
- Lab-based serology testing.

The audit demonstrated that the installed base of nucleic acid test technology was substantial and could enable increased testing within the existing accredited pathology laboratory framework. However, supply of some critical components required to complete testing lagged demand in some cases.

The gaps in supply have led to a push by government for both a local manufacturing capability and for increased diversity in supply of consumables from outside Australia. Once again Pathology Technology Australia was able to leverage our network to advise government on resources within Australia that could provide local manufacturing and supply. Key to this were some of our Australian based members, who quickly stepped in and filled some of the supply gaps.

The audit also demonstrated that within the accredited pathology laboratory infrastructure there is enough capacity to significantly increase COVID-19 serology testing.

Pathology Technology Australia is a major sponsor of the Know Pathology Know Healthcare program (run by Pathology Awareness Australia). It is through this program that we participate in a coalition of more than 30 healthcare related groups to form the Continuity of Care Coalition. This group has been responsible for raising awareness of the importance for people to continue looking after their health. This has resulted in testing numbers improving dramatically.

Pathology Technology Australia published 3 position papers during the pandemic:

- *COVID-19 Avoiding the second Tsunami of Healthcare Challenges*. This paper was first published on 2nd April and outlined the concerns we had for people not following up on their healthcare needs outside of COVID-19.
- *National Testing Strategy for COVID-19 Recovery*. First published on 22nd April and recommended a testing strategy based on published data demonstrating that nucleic acid tests and serology testing together have greater diagnostic accuracy than either test done separately. Our recommendations suggested that serology testing has a role in our testing strategy as we emerge from the initial stages of this pandemic. It is important for our understanding of individual and population immunity and it is important for certain groups within our population, such as healthcare workers, teachers and first responders.
- *Making sense of a national testing stockpile*. First published on 4th May, this paper points out the challenges we face in developing a national stockpile of testing kits. It also highlights challenges we will face in maintaining local manufacturing capability at levels enough to supply our needs in a pandemic. Tests are not the same as PPE. They often have a very short shelf life and require exacting storage conditions. Our best suggestion for managing a short-term supply challenge is to fund supply companies to hold an extra 2- or 3-month's inventory in their local warehouses and have them manage the storage and turn-over of the stock accordingly.

Dean Whiting
CEO, Pathology Technology Australia