



Managing the long-term health consequences of COVID-19 in Australia

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In Australia, the immediate urgency of responding to the pandemic and the pressing need to respond operationally has moved attention away from health system reform. This situation will not persist indefinitely, and Australian governments should now consider an effective and proportionate value-based response to COVID-19, Long COVID and its other longer-term consequences, that considers both patient health outcomes and costs.

Recommendations

- Primary prevention of COVID-19 should be prioritised as the most effective means of mitigating the long-term health consequences of infection at population level, however plans must be put in place to allow rapid scaling-up of long-term care were COVID-19 control measures to fail.
- Although estimated case numbers in Australia are low, the emergence of Long COVID provides an opportunity to implement new approaches to integrated, well-coordinated, multidisciplinary, person centred care. This will require health care professions to be supported to work at the top of their scope of practice and should occur through:
 - a national post-COVID Centre of Excellence and state-based care coordination centres;
 - a nationwide COVID-19 data registry that combines patient-level data on COVID-19 and subsequent health and healthcare utilisation history;
 - commissioned research and modelling on the morbidity burden of Long COVID and post-COVID sequelae in different age and population groups that supplements emerging data on the mortality burden of COVID-19 and associated control measures;
 - the development of regular, updated clinical guidelines that reflect evolving evidence on the long-term management of post-COVID care; and

- MBS and PBS benefits that adequately support patients living with Long COVID or other sequelae and other “safety net” measures put in place to mitigate out-of-pocket costs for chronic disease management to support these patients fully.
- The Australian and state and territory governments should consider the long-term care consequences of COVID and its associated additional cost burden in resource allocation and risk management decision processes in parallel with COVID-19 control strategy policies.
- Support should also be provided for research that focuses on health policy, health economics, social determinants and more directly on the effect of COVID-19 on the structure and function of the health system.
- Although Long COVID is not yet fully understood, health policy makers should be preparing to address it.

Figure 1. Possible health system impacts of COVID-19 over the short to longer term time horizon.

