23 April 2020

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
Parliament House, Canberra

Dear Minister,

I write to offer a contribution to the present debate over resourcing for the World Health Organization.

In short, our Association deeply regrets US President Donald Trump’s recent course of action in temporarily denying US funding to the WHO.

Every public entity deserves ongoing scrutiny, as well as occasionally special inquiry into its affairs from time to time. This is true of the complex UN agencies no less than it is of national governments and agencies.

Moreover, as the COVID outbreak is arguably the most serious worldwide public health emergency since the WHO was founded in the 1940s, a comprehensive review of the organisation’s capabilities, preparations and actions will make sense - but only once the crisis stabilises. In the present circumstances, WHO and its staff need to be entirely focussed on their very demanding mission.

If a debate needs to be had about the WHO changing its practices, or taking on additional or different work, so be it – indeed given the dramatic change in world affairs, that seems to be a very sensible debate to have. But that is not the tone of recent US comments.

Playing politics with the WHO, and its resourcing, for what are appear to be short-term domestic political aims – as the US Government seem to be doing – is conduct unworthy of a national government. We strongly urge the Australian Government not to join in, nor give indirect support to, this needless and unproductive criticism of the WHO.

The current politicisation relating to the WHO may well have real-world effects in hindering the fight against the virus. In current conditions. The people of the world need more – not less – from the World Health Organisation, and for that maintaining strong resourcing will be essential.

We strongly urge the Australian Government, in its public statements and in any discussion occurring within the World Health Assembly, to reject the present position of the US President, and indeed to use your good offices to try to change that position.
In addition, if necessary, Australia’s Government should consider supporting the WHO with its own additional resourcing, whether in part substitution for the withheld US funding, or simply in recognition of the current greatly expanded expectations on WHO to support member nations. Specifically, the WHO has sought donor funding for its COVID Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan, and we urge the Australian Government to contribute what it can.

We ask you to consider in particular the plight of the peoples of low- and middle-income countries, which may be unusually reliant on WHO assistance at this time.

Containing the spread of COVID now and in the months ahead is a world task, which recognises no borders, and respects no political goals. In this matter, please let your Government’s decisions keep the health of the world’s peoples as the paramount consideration.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Terry Slevin
Chief Executive Officer
Public Health Association of Australia