Media Release

12 June 2020

Black Lives Matter protests should proceed - safely

“Two hugely important public health objectives – Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 – have been framed as competing imperatives. They are not,” said PHAA CEO Terry Slevin today.

The Black Lives Matter movement in Australia seeks to highlight the deplorable circumstances of disadvantage and discrimination experienced by Australia’s first peoples. It is an important vehicle to seek changes that will help ‘close the gap’, and address generations of inequality and injustice which continues to this day.

Addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is one of the highest order public health issues in Australia today. The fact that over 430 Indigenous deaths in custody have been recorded since the 1991 Royal Commission is a stark illustration of this emergency.

It is indisputable that racism is a real and ever-present public health issue. Racism in Australia obviously precedes COVID-19, and has a massive continuing impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Australia has managed the COVID-19 pandemic very successfully. PHAA has recognised this through our special PHAA President’s Award for Members of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPCC) on 12 May.

“We have enormous regard for the work of the public health officials and governments around Australia who have taken the hard decisions to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on the health of Australians,” said Mr Slevin. “With extremely low levels of community transmission, effective contact tracing and quarantine, Australia is well placed to control the virus.”

“We also respect all who support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make the case for reforms to policies that will improve the circumstances of Indigenous Australians.”

“We call on governments and police to lend every support to the BLM protestors in exercising their democratic right to peaceful protest, to forego any legal action to hinder protests, and to support protests in ways that mitigate any risk of COVID-19, for example by providing masks to protesters.”

“We call on protest organisers to take every possible measure to avoid virus transmission. We recommend that all who choose to be involved in protests wear masks, maintain physical distancing, and download the CovidSafe app.”

“We urge all involved – protestors, police, and anyone in the vicinity – to be respectful, peaceful and non violent.”

“If the same commitment made by Australians and their governments to control COVID-19 was applied to eradicating racism and improving the circumstances of our first people, Australia would be an enormously advanced nation.”

Media enquires: Terry Slevin 0419 901 599.