Will we be ready for the next one?

Australia’s governments should be planning now for organizational, resourcing, and preventive policies to prepare for future pandemics, said PHAA CEO Terry Slevin today.

“Increasing our preventive investment – and thereby saving massively on future disease treatment costs in our hospital and wider health systems – must be a national priority.”

“We’ve coped well so far – through great efforts and at great cost – with COVID-19. But just as importantly, we need to be learning long-term lessons arising from our rapid scramble to react to COVID up to this point. And we need to remember, this pandemic is a long way from being over”

“There are major questions for governments, educational institutions, and the whole community to address.”

“First, are our public health organizational structures the best they could be? Our state government public health agencies have proved to be effective, and the national coordination has also been excellent.”

“Yet Australia is still one of the only OECD nations without a central national public health and disease control agency. We should we be thinking now about how to build those structures, while the lessons are front of mind?”

“Second, we need to seriously reconsider the maintenance of our public health workforce. Across Australia in the last three months, thousands of state and federal public servants have been rapidly re-tasked to help cope with a bewildering variety of COVID-response demands, from contact tracing to risk assessment and communication, working with law enforcement, and much much more.”

“This has shown up how thin our public health workforce was before the emergency began. Issues of training, long-term credentialing, and adequacy of Australia’s higher education supply of public-health-skilled workers should be front of mind.”

“Finally, we need to radically reconsider our nation’s approach to disease prevention. At less than 2% of national health spending, Australia’s investment in public health and prevention is very low by the standard other OECD nations. To ensure success in dealing with future communicable and chronic disease, we need to revise that investment now.”

“Working with our community, businesses, schools and other parts of our society, many of the emergency responses we have taken must be permanently embedded in our way of life. Governments need to focus not on the economic cost of such changes, but on the even greater economic costs that they will avoid.”

“COVID will not be the last pandemic. This is the world we live in, and we need to be better prepared.”

For further information/comment:
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