COVID-19 Wars: More resources needed to take up the public health battle?

Tomorrow, 25 July 2020, marks six months since the Federal Health Minister, Greg Hunt, made a public announcement that Australia had recorded its first case of COVID-19. Six months on, what have we learned?

The CEO of the Public Health Association Australia (PHAA), Terry Slevin, says notwithstanding the recent outbreaks in Victoria and NSW, Australia can hold its head high.

‘But it has also revealed major weaknesses in our armour, in particular a dramatic under-investment in public health which has found us wanting in many areas of our response,’ Mr Slevin said.

‘Public and preventive health attracts less than 2% of Australia’s national health investment - which tops $185 billion p.a. We are also the only OECD country without a centralised communicable disease and public health agency.

‘The issue is how best to structure and deploy the nation’s public health expertise in a coordinated way. The even greater imperative is, how much larger a health workforce do we need, across all governments, to be confident that we can keep Australians safe?’

The PHAA CEO says COVID-19 has highlighted a number of vulnerabilities, including our lack of investment in specialist doctors.

‘In 2019, Australia supported 1,057 Specialist Doctor Training positions and only 27 of those were public health doctors.

‘Similarly, in rallying to the national COVID response, our wafer-thin line of public health workers and experts have had to abandon their important life-saving work in areas like cancer screening, immunisation and nutrition. They have been magnificent, yet stretched to breaking point.

‘As we enter the next and challenging stage of the ‘COVID wars’ it’s timely for all Australian governments to urgently review the resources we are taking into this battle. How prepared are we for the next and future, as yet unknown battlegrounds?’

Mr Slevin urged Australians to remain focused and vigilant in a whole-of-nation effort to prevent the disease spreading further.

‘In contrast to other nations, Australians have largely invested their faith and trust in our governments and our experts. And we need to work to keep that trust, and reinforce the safest behaviours. Without that cooperation, many, many more of us would have fallen ill, and many more lives would have been lost,’ Mr Slevin said.
‘The past six months has shown we have outstanding international leaders in public health. We’ve seen them on our screens daily over the last six months, and in the main we have all heeded their advice.

‘But facing this battle, they need reinforcements, and they should not be taking on this fight on the smell of an oily rag.

‘It is accepted that COVID-19 is a long way from over, and the prospect of similar future viral outbreaks is very real, even likely. So, we now need to urgently consider how we boost our capacity to deal with the future of this virus, and plan for the prospects of the next.’

For further information/comment:
Karina Martin, PHAA Media Manager 0450 522 762 kmartin@phaa.net.au