Inquiry needed into public health workforce shortfall

All Australian governments, Commonwealth, States and Territories, should commit to conducting an immediate inquiry into their public health workforce and capacity once the crisis phase of COVID-19 has passed, according to the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA).

‘I was surprised and disappointed by Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews’ response to the public health workforce issues raised today,’ said Terry Slevin, CEO of PHAA.

‘While there is clearly enormous pressure on the Premier and the public health team in Victoria, and I am keen to avoid adding to the current extraordinary strain, the situation in Victoria is at least partly linked to a long-term problem with under investment in public health capacity.

‘That is due to decisions of the current and many previous governments, regardless of political persuasion.

‘By way of comparison, the 30-year history of commitment to the Public Health Officer Training Program in NSW reports having recruited and trained 182 specialist senior public health workers. This commitment has remained in place as different governments and different parties leading government have come and gone.

‘And while that workforce is currently under enormous stress, and this is no guarantee against further outbreaks in NSW, it is clear that the capacity that exists in NSW has been an important part of the response to date there.

‘Victoria isn’t alone in failing to make this long-term investment. NSW is on its own with this level of ongoing commitment to training its public health workforce. All other jurisdictions have failed to measure up and that leaves them more vulnerable in times like this.

‘A training program is of course, not an overnight fix. A program implemented today would not help address the current pandemic.

‘But it is fair to say that the current circumstances demand every Australian government, Commonwealth, States and Territories ask the question – “should we do more to boost our public health workforce and capacity into the future?”

‘If the answer is yes – and in most cases that is likely to be so - the time to start doing so is now.

‘Investment in public health is the best value and least costly insurance that governments could take out against future outbreaks.

‘In the middle of the bushfire, you don’t criticise those at the front line trying to put the fire out. But once the crisis has passed, it makes sense to review the experience and query if the necessary people, expertise, equipment and resources were in place to deal with the emergency. You also ask what could have been
done to reduce the risk of the fire happening in the first place, where the greatest need was, and how to do better next time.

‘This pandemic should be treated exactly the same way,’ Mr Slevin said.

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