



# COVID-19 General Practice, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), and GP-led Respiratory Clinics Response Review

February 2020-June 2022

## Introduction – and thank you

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Since February 2020, general practice has underpinned Australia's response to COVID-19. At Northern Queensland Primary Health Network (NQPHN), we have been privileged to collaborate with the primary care sector during the COVID-19 pandemic response. This review is an opportunity for NQPHN to say thank you to

the general practices, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), and other primary care providers for the dedication and hard work they have provided to help northern Queenslanders stay safe and live happier, healthier, longer lives during the pandemic.

## The evidence of primary care success is in data

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General practices across Queensland have provided an increased number of services during the COVID-19 pandemic to assist in protecting the health of the community, according to recent Statewide data released. Collectively there has been an increase in patient attendances and/or activity when comparing March 2019 to March 2022, including:

- » an 11.5% increase in chronic disease management
- » a 10.6% increase in mental health care
- » a 4.8% increase in health assessments.

This increase in services has taken place while GPs, ACCHOs, and GP Respiratory Clinics (GPRCs) administered more than 5.3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines in Queensland from February 2021 to March 2022. GPs, ACCHOs, and GPRCs continue to deliver COVID-19 vaccinations on a day-to-day basis, while also stepping up to deliver influenza vaccinations this winter.

GPs and practice staff, pharmacists and pharmacy staff, along with Indigenous health workers, have all played a critical role during the COVID-19 pandemic response.

These latest figures acknowledge the leadership role taken, and volume of activity delivered, by general practices and ACCHOs during the pandemic.

GPs and practice staff such as managers, nurses, and receptionists, as well as Indigenous health workers, have been nothing short of inspirational.

The way they have responded to the demands of the pandemic, doing their job in a really professional way, while also managing an increase in 'business as usual' services, has provided a pillar of strength for our communities.



Robin Whyte  
Chief Executive Officer  
Northern Queensland Primary Health Network



*NQPHN acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First Nation Peoples and the Traditional Custodians of this land. We respect their continued connection to land and sea, country, kin, and community. We also pay our respect to their Elders past, present, and emerging as the custodians of knowledge and lore.*

# NQ general practice COVID-19 response highlights

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, general practice rapidly and extensively changed service and care delivery to ensure the wellbeing of patients, while also experiencing an increase in activity.

General practice quickly adopted new models of service delivery to ensure continuity of care during the COVID response. This included:

- » Screening of patients at booking.
- » Triage of patients, with telehealth appointments offered to support patients.
- » Reconfiguring clinics and clinic schedules to enable continuity care of patients (later in the COVID-19 response, incorporating COVID-19 vaccination assessments and vaccinations).
- » Installation of personal screens.
- » Routine use of Protective Personal Equipment (PPE).
- » Increased use of telehealth to support patients.
- » Implementing strategies to manage increase workloads for reception staff.



## GP Respiratory Clinics

In mid-March 2020, the Australian Government Department of Health announced the establishment of more than 100 GP Respiratory Clinics (GPRCs) nationally. These clinics, operated by and under the clinical governance of existing general practices, would reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, optimise the use of available stocks of PPE, and help reduce the pressure on hospital emergency departments.

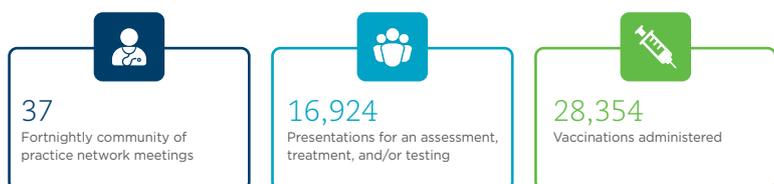
Across the NQPHN region, six practices commenced operating as GPRCs and three of these GPRCs remain in operation today. Once established, the clinics showed great resilience and commitment to support their local communities, including building additional capacity when needed through staffing and opening hours, often at short notice.

This was further exemplified when GPRCs in North Queensland played a key role in the COVID-19 vaccination rollout, administering age-appropriate COVID-19 vaccines and boosters.



### NQPHN region

» [General Practice Respiratory Clinics](#)



\*Data correct as of 30 June 2022  
Data source: NQPHN Events Data Collection, 2020, 2021, 2022; Rhino Aspen GP Respiratory Clinic data collection, 2022; CVAX-19 Statistics and Progress, Queensland Health, 2022 (accessed 1 July 2022)

## Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

The demand for and access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) became a significant issue during the COVID-19 pandemic response, locally, nationally, and internationally. General practice and other primary care providers needed to rapidly incorporate the use of PPE into all levels of their service delivery, from frontline reception to GP consultation.

To support the change in service delivery and the significant role they played in protecting the health of our communities, general practice utilised the PPE available through the National Medical Stockpile. They also participated in mask fit testing and infection control training (including APNA/NQPHN's Basic Principles of Infection Prevention and Control webinar).



### NQPHN region

Total PPE items distributed from National Medical Stockpile: 547,367

» Personal protective equipment (PPE) distributed and utilised by general practices, GPRCs, ACCHOs, and pharmacy staff.



\*Data correct as of 30 June 2022  
Data source: NQPHN PPE collection, 2022

## COVID-19 vaccination rollout

Operation COVID Shield was the Australian Government Department of Health's national program to ensure as many Australians were vaccinated against COVID-19 as early as possible.

To deliver the most efficient and effective distribution and delivery of the vaccine, general practice was tasked with the frontline primary care delivery of a safe and efficient vaccine rollout.

As of 30 June 2022, there were a total of 136 general practices, 11 Aboriginal Medical Services/Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (AMSs/ACCHOs), 3 GPRCs, and 112 pharmacies in North Queensland administering the COVID-19 vaccine.

Across the NQPHN region, GPs, ACCHO, GPRCs and pharmacies administered more than 777,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines from February 2021 to June 2022 – an incredible achievement to protect the health and wellbeing of all North Queenslanders.



## NQPHN region

» Number of vaccines administered



777,492

Vaccinations administered by general practices, General Practice Respiratory Clinics, pharmacies, and Aboriginal Medical Services.

\*Data correct as of 30 June 2022  
Data source: CVAX-19 Statistics and Progress, Queensland Health, 2022 (accessed 1 July 2022)

## Vulnerable populations

General practice was again called upon to extend their practice and play a key role in administering COVID-19 and influenza vaccinations to aged care residents and staff across North Queensland

General practice also helped to vaccinate vulnerable populations who may have had difficulty in accessing COVID-19 vaccines. These vulnerable groups included (but were not limited to):

- » those who were experiencing homelessness
- » people with a disability or were frail and could not leave home

- » people in rural and remote areas with limited healthcare options
- » culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people
- » those who were not eligible for Medicare and/or lived in an area without access to a state, territory or Commonwealth Vaccination Clinic
- » aged care and disability workers.

GPs supported vaccination delivery to vulnerable groups through home visit vaccinations and outreach clinics (e.g. homeless shelters and domestic violence centres).



## Training and education

To ensure that GPs and general practice teams could meet the increasing demands of responding to COVID-19, general practices extended their hours of service, collaborated with the broader healthcare sector, and embraced the training and education opportunities available during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure they provided the best possible health care to their patients. This often included collaboration consultation and training events after full practice days.

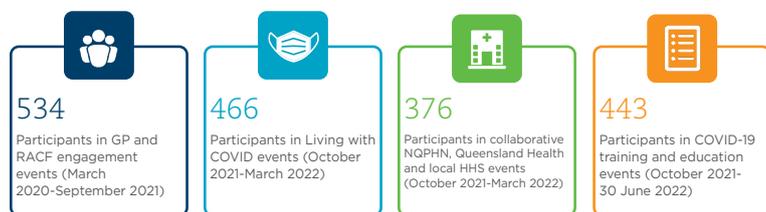
Other GP training and education activities included:

- » Use of HealthPathways and regionalised COVID-positive community care pathways.
- » Attending regular (fortnightly) Statewide webinars in 2022 for GPs with the latest information and advice on living with COVID-19.
- » Completing P2/N95 Mask Fit Test Training.
- » Infection control updates.
- » Frontline staff capacity building.



## NQPHN region

» Primary care provider training and education



\*includes mask fit test training and infection control training.

\*Data correct as of 30 June 2022  
Data source: NQPHN events data collection, 2020, 2021, 2022

## Engagement and collaboration

To ensure a comprehensive response to COVID-19, GPs, ACCHOs, and GPRCs were required to engage in a range of meetings, consultations, and collaborative projects. These included but were not limited to:

- » GP Roundtables with Queensland Health and NQPHN.
- » Development of regionalised COVID-positive community care pathways.
- » Public Health updates.
- » Localised cross jurisdictional planning to support whole of system vaccination rollout.

GPs also played a leading role throughout the response phase of the COVID-19 pandemic by reviewing, collating, and actioning extensive communication of key messages sent out by government and non-government organisations. The emerging COVID-19 pandemic often required fast-paced pivots from the primary care sector to ensure rapid responses to government and key health agency advice. GPs, ACCHOs, and GPRCs were tasked with ensuring the community received the correct advice, support, and guidance. GPs and general practice led the way in responding to the needs of the community and representing these needs to State and Federal peak bodies.



## General practice and primary care post COVID-19

International and local research<sup>1,2</sup>, indicates that GPs and primary care will continue to be at the forefront of helping patients cope with the ongoing legacy left by COVID-19. General practice and primary care will be expected to provide high-quality primary care in a system affected by workforce shortages, funding restraints, and continued pandemic peaks and troughs. NQPHN recognises that general practice and other primary care providers need to be appropriately supported.

As a result, NQPHN is developing a Build Back Better Initiative which over the coming years will provide general practice with opportunities to gain skills to support their teams through future challenges. NQPHN looks forward to engaging with GPs and practice staff to receive input in the development and implementation of activities within this initiative.

<sup>1</sup>Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Australia, 2022, Patient resource: Managing post-COVID-19 symptoms

<sup>2</sup>Royal College of General Practitioners, UK, 2021, General practice post-Covid



## Final word

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This document is just a snapshot of the vital role general practices have played in keeping North Queensland communities healthy during the COVID-19 response.

General practices are the core of our health system, and during the COVID-19 response, they have had to adapt to new ways of caring for patients, such as the introduction of telehealth services and the expanded use of PPE, while still responding to an increase in business-as-usual services.

The way that general practice has stepped up during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates just how important their role is in protecting the health of our communities.

The vaccination rollout is an example of this, which has been a massive undertaking where GPs have been essential to its success.

GPs play a vital role in saving lives and protecting the health of our communities, and NQPHN would like to thank them for everything they have done during the pandemic.

We look forward to continuing to work with general practice to help northern Queenslanders live happier, healthier, longer lives.

# Appendix

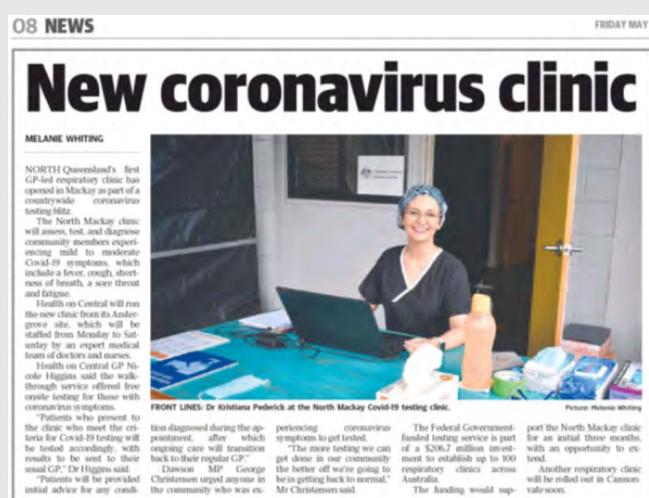
## Media releases promoting and supporting work of general practices/primary care

- » [NQPHN distributes 182,000 PPE items to GPs and ACCHOs](#)
- » [Dedicated health professionals in North Queensland saluted on International Nurses Day](#)
- » [Living with COVID-19 workshops held across North Queensland](#)
- » **Vaccine/Works** campaign:
  - o [Sarina](#)
  - o [Ingham](#)
  - o [Innisfail](#)
  - o [Townsville and Charters Towers](#)
  - o [Cairns](#)



Scan the QR Code or [click here](#) to find out more.

## Media coverage showing COVID-19 primary care response



# Clinics in vaccine spotlight

GP RESPIRATORY clinics in Townsville and Charters Towers are the latest to be showcased in the North Queensland Primary Health Network's Covid-19 campaign Vaccine Works.

The campaign shines a spotlight on the region's general practices and pharmacies making a dent in the region's vaccination rate.

As of Monday, the Townsville and Charters Towers respiratory clinics have delivered more than 14,000 Covid-19 vaccines.

Townsville GP Respiratory Clinic practice manager Kerrie Rankin said the clinic was proud to be able to do this for the community: "Without the support of our teams, including reception and nurses, we wouldn't have been able to do it and we appreciate everything that they have contributed."

NQPHN chief executive officer Robin Whyte praised the two clinics.

"Primary care plays a vital role in the national vaccination rollout program, as it has the capacity to vaccinate in a distributed model by offering place-based solutions in local communities," Ms Whyte said.

# Far Northerners in jostle for job spots



Orange Health Medical Practice principal Melissa Hilda vacates her coronavirus job from registered nurse Anna McCurdy. Picture: Brandon Kuehn

### PETER CARROLL

"I don't intend to do the business job but I have been doing it for a while. I am waiting for an overseas client to come up with a plan to keep up with things."

to become aware the practice was taking part in the next stage of vaccine rollout, she didn't bid but she did.

"It was an 8 o'clock start, and in the morning it has been really busy. It has been quite busy. As we continue to get things going," she said.

The Mackay practice had been allocated 40,000 vaccines a week, which are available to Australians over 16, although people over 18, younger adults with an underlying medical condition and critical high-risk workers, including emergency services personnel.

GP Melissa Hilda indicated there was an issue as to when the Australian equivalent vaccine would be for Northern clinics.

Ms Hilda, sceptical by the number of supplies, said she had done almost double for the job, was for greater than available supply.

"It's very popular and it's exciting to see so many people happy to have the vaccine done," she said.

The vast numbers of people had been listed on the waiting list due to the practice having been allocated limited weekly doses.

Refused patients have been participating medical centres are required to bring a one-page health summary to get them to go through phase 1b.

Ms Hilda said phase 1a of the vaccine rollout targeting people over 65 was expected to begin in October.

# JAB HEROES SHINE IN NEW CAMPAIGN

VACCINE providers in the Innisfail region are being showcased in a new campaign that highlights what primary care providers are doing to help during the ongoing pandemic.

Northern Queensland Primary Health Network's Vaccine Works campaign spotlights the region's general practices and pharmacies, and focuses on their role in increasing Covid-19 vaccination rates in North Queensland.

In Innisfail, vaccinating clinics had (as of November 2) collectively delivered more than 12,000 doses.

Chemist Warehouse Innisfail managing partner and pharmacist Joel Ng said it had been great to see pharmacies able to administer Covid-19 vaccines to the community.

"The uptake of the vaccine has been very positive from the Innisfail community. We were fully booked on our vaccination days and had to increase the booking slot in order to accommodate for the demand," Mr Ng said.

NQPHN chief executive officer Robin Whyte praised Innisfail's vaccinating GPs and pharmacies and said the primary care sector was playing a key role.



Chemist Warehouse pharmacist Joyce Lo vaccinates Ashlea Welch at the Innisfail site.

# DOCTORS NOW IN HOT SEAT



Dr Olaf Rusoke-Dierich receives his COVID-19 vaccine from nurse Emily Vagulars at Fairfield Central Medical Practice. Picture: ALIX SWEENEY

### CAITLAN CHARLES

TOWNVILLE GPs have officially started rolling out the AstraZeneca vaccine as part of phase 1b.

GP Dr Michael Clements and the doctors at his Townsville practices were some of the first to roll up their sleeves yesterday, with doctors on the priority list for this phase.

Dr Clements said his practices wasted no time in giving inoculations, also bringing in high-priority patients to receive their first jab. His Fairfield practice received 400 doses while his city practice received just 100.

Dr Clements said GPs were receiving different numbers of vaccines, so while there would be enough to share around, stocks were sparse at the moment.

"We are encouraging people to check the health.gov.au eligibility checker," Dr Clements said.

He asked that patients booking at his practices, after they had used the eligibility checker, register for an appointment online to keep the phone lines free.

Only some practices in Townsville are offering the vaccinations at this point. If you fit into the phase 1b section of the rollout, the practices offering the vaccine are listed on the health.gov.au website.

Phase 1b includes elderly adults aged 70 and over, some healthcare workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults over 55, adults with a specified medical condition or disability, and critical or high-risk workers including Defence, police, fire, emergency services and meat processors.

