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## **JOINT MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **\$24 million for telehealth to support GPs, specialists and their patients to stay connected, and over 20 million units of PPE**

As Omicron case numbers grow, the Australian Government will make temporary changes to Telehealth to give GPs and specialists additional flexibility to support their patients safely, including the continued supply of PPE and online support. An additional \$24 million has been committed to fund these changes and builds on the \$34 billion provided since the pandemic began.

Telehealth has been a vital support during the pandemic providing greater flexibility in healthcare delivery at the most critical time and it continues to be a fundamental part of the pandemic response.

The Government will introduce temporary specialist inpatient telehealth MBS items (video and phone) and initial and complex specialist telephone consultation items, and longer telephone consultations for GP's (level C) until 30 June 2022.

These services will be made available nationally rather than targeted to Commonwealth-declared hotspots as they were previously, recognising the high infection rate and need to provide healthcare support across the community.

Enabling specialist medical practitioners to provide telehealth consultations to hospital in-patients as a temporary measure will support continuity of care for patients when their doctor cannot attend the hospital due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Helping GPs and specialists manage their patients with mild symptoms will relieve pressure on Australia's hospital system, ensuring people who need hospital care can get it, and our hard-working hospital staff can sustain their incredible efforts through the current Omicron surge.

These short term telehealth measures will also help to minimise risks for patients who would otherwise have to travel for a face-to-face consultation, especially people living in rural and remote Australia, vulnerable and older patients. They will also benefit people who are immunocompromised, under the care of a psychiatrist, living with cancer or pregnant.

The Government will also expand the MBS item for GPs caring for COVID positive patients in the community through face-to-face consultations to include patients that have tested positive through a rapid antigen test (RAT). This aligns with National Cabinet's decision on 5 January 2022 that RAT tests no longer need to be confirmed by PCR.

To support GPs and others providing face to face care for COVID-positive patients, the Government is also providing comprehensive packages of personal protective equipment (PPE) to GPs, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and GP Respiratory Clinics.

Over the next three months, over 20 million units of PPE will be provided for primary care, including nine million p2/n95 masks for GPs and three million for pharmacists across Australia. These are being prioritised for rural, regional and remote areas where access to PPE can be challenging. Shipments began before Christmas and are continuing nationwide.

The Australian Government has also worked with Healthdirect to develop a national assessment, triage and notification infrastructure. This will connect people who test positive with the appropriate level of care and advice based on guidelines developed by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (soon to be available in multiple community languages). This is expected to commence in Queensland on 17 January 2022 with other states to follow.

Through this service, Healthdirect – which already provides the National Coronavirus Hotline, symptom checker and a range of online resources – will be the point of contact for anyone with a positive COVID result to receive assessment, information on what to do and connect them to appropriate care.

This is supported by community care pathways developed across jurisdictions to ensure GPs have the information they need to manage patients, and that people recovering at home can be referred to social support services if they face challenges during their isolation period.

These measures join the \$180 million Living with COVID package for primary care announced last year, which extends the reach and role of GP Respiratory Clinics. Patients with COVID positive results can safely attend these clinics for assessment and management, rather than presenting at emergency departments in non-urgent circumstances.

Like regular practices, GP Respiratory Clinics will guide and support people to monitor their symptoms at home and seek additional medical assistance when appropriate.

Throughout the pandemic the Australian Government has worked closely with state and territory governments and peak organisations to respond to changing circumstances. We have listened to our frontline workers and made changes to help them help their patients.

All these changes support GPs and specialist medical practitioners to manage the significant increase in Australians with mild to moderate symptoms of COVID-19.

They will ensure continuity of care for Australians, whether they have COVID or other conditions, relieve pressure on the hospital system during the current Omicron surge, and help communities all over the country to get through the present challenges as soon as possible.

Information relating to COVID-19 is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by phoning the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080 or visit [www.aus.gov.au](http://www.aus.gov.au).

PPE allocations

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For GPs – Jan to March 2022

Product Type	Jan	Feb	March	Total
Face Shields/goggles	780,000	780,000	780,000	2,340,000
Gloves	1,398,000	1,398,000	1,398,000	4,194,000
Hand sanitiser (bottles)	27,960	27,960	27,960	83,880
Surgical masks	1,118,400	1,118,400	1,118,400	3,355,200
P2/N95 respirators	1,755,000	1,755,000	1,755,000	5,265,000
Gowns	559,200	559,200	559,200	1,677,600
Total	5,638,560	5,638,560	5,638,560	16,915,680

For Pharmacists – Jan to March 2022

Product Type	Jan	Feb	March	Total
P2/N95 respirators	1,000,880	1,000,880	1,000,880	3,002,400
Goggles OR Face shields	7,000	As needed	As needed	7,000
Surgical Masks	175,000	175,000	175,000	525,000
Total	1,182,880	1,175,880	1,175,880	3,534,400

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