

MEDIA RELEASE

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A safe COVID opening for the Northern Territory

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT) today outlined key principles and actions required for a safe COVID opening up of the Northern Territory. These were agreed to following the release of the new Doherty modelling for the NT and following a meeting of AMSANT's Board in Darwin yesterday.

“Critical to reopening is the need to achieve a safe threshold of high vaccination rates across NT communities as well as reliable data to tell us when we have reached these thresholds and can safely take the next steps,” AMSANT CEO, John Paterson said.

“AMSANT has supported the agreed road map which requires 80% double dose coverage across all five regions. The Doherty modelling that has been released is clear that inclusion of children aged 5-11 is critical to protecting our communities. We agree with a revised target of 80% vaccine coverage from 5 years and above before opening up, beginning two months after vaccination becomes available for this group. In the meantime we need to maintain the need for 90% coverage for Aboriginal people over the age of 16.

The AMSANT Board supports home quarantining with regular testing as long as it occurs only in urban areas with vaccine coverage of at least 80% double dose and only in households where everyone is vaccinated who is eligible to be vaccinated. To ensure compliance, there needs to continue to be signed agreements by all that make it clear that if there is a breach of quarantine, the whole household will be required to enter supervised quarantine at their own expense.

“With regard to the requirement for rapid antigen testing and mask wearing in remote communities below 70% first vaccination levels for people 16 years and over, AMSANT was not included in discussions about the justification for this specific new measure. We have been involved in discussions about the need for additional measures to protect vulnerable remote communities with low vaccination rates which we support. We are also concerned that an overly punitive approach to the implementation of this measure could undermine efforts to accelerate vaccination in these communities. It is critical that the government engages meaningfully on why and how this measure should be implemented and alternatives, such as vaccine passports, that would avoid punitive and potentially criminalising consequences.

“Reliable data is essential to tell us when it is safe to act. The Commonwealth Australian Immunisation Register estimation of NT immunisation coverage is currently 67% double dose, **or about 11% lower than NT Government estimates**. We trust the Commonwealth methodology, that every other jurisdiction, including those with remote regions, are using. We know that the NT's data (using a jab in arms methodology) includes many visitors, causing an overestimate of the immunisation rate for people who actually live in the NT.

“Consequently, we believe that the current stated intention of the NT Government to take crucial steps in relaxing COVID restrictions at the 80% double dose level based on its faulty data is unsafe and so we are asking that the NT Government agrees to use Commonwealth data.

“AMSANT believes that data sharing between the NT Government and the ACCHS sector is essential, and wishes to clarify that, contrary to the claims of the Chief Minister, our sector has been sharing immunisation data at a community level with the NT Government for months now.

“However, AMSANT has not supported the public release of community level data without community consent and proposed a data sharing agreement with the NT Department of Health that included protections on the misuse of data. The AMSANT Board has agreed in principle to support broader data sharing of community level COVID vaccine data, including with the Chief Minister and his department and the Minister for Health, with such protections in place.

“Above all, our urgent priority is to accelerate the vaccination rollout across the NT and particularly in Aboriginal communities, as the best protection we can provide”, Mr Paterson said.

“But to do this we need a close partnership and collaboration between the NT Government and the ACCHSs sector, as well as the Land Councils and other key stakeholders. In many respects this is happening, but we are falling short in critical areas, particularly in collaboration on decision-making.

“The AMSANT Board was also strongly of the view that other sectors of the community should be expected to take more responsibility to do their bit to protect Territorians from the pandemic. The business sector must step up and ensure vaccination check ins, and cooperate with other public health measures. The local government sector also needs to play their part as should other industry groups. Positive advocacy from all of these groups will enable us to reach our immunisation targets sooner.

“AMSANT strongly advocates for the immediate introduction of vaccine passports to increase community protection and to act as a powerful incentive for those who are hesitant or lax in getting vaccinated. The Darwin lockout has been hugely effective at increasing vaccination in young people – but the effect will not be prolonged without an ongoing mechanism such as vaccine passports. We need to move quickly on this.

“Finally, before we open up, we need to ensure we have enough staff to deal with COVID outbreaks across primary health care and the hospital sector, that we know will occur when we open up. The Doherty modelling is sobering. Our services are currently short staffed and this will get worse over Christmas and January as it always does. We must address the significant staffing shortages the health sector currently faces and also ensure an additional surge workforce to cope with COVID outbreaks. Assistance with international recruitment including from New Zealand is critical.

“We have a choice between working together to ensure that our opening up process is as safe as it can be, or exposing our communities to avoidable harm and calamity if we don’t.

“An overarching principle of action must be to commit to shared decision-making with Aboriginal communities and their key institutions,” Mr Paterson concluded.

Media inquiries: John Paterson 0418 904 727