

MEDIA RELEASE

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Special control measures urgently required to halt COVID spread to the NT

Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance (AMSANT) today expressed support for a proposal to make the entire NT and the tristate region a Special Control Area for COVID 19. The measure would simply apply the same travel restrictions that are now mandatory for international visitors arriving in Australia, to visitors to the Northern Territory from any Australian jurisdiction.

“New Zealand and Tasmania have led the way in forward-thinking, decisive action to fight this virus. We must follow their lead”, AMSANT CEO, John Paterson said.

“The recent spike in numbers of confirmed cases in other jurisdictions, particularly NSW, Queensland and Victoria, points to an exponential growth of spread. Yet the NT remains without any cases”.

“This offers a narrow window of opportunity to introduce measures now to prevent the spread of the virus into the NT, or at least significantly delay and minimise any spread.

“Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures”, Mr Paterson said.

“Our Aboriginal population comprises the most vulnerable group in Australia and the projections for the likely health impacts of COVID 19 are nothing short of devastating. The H1N1 virus in 2009 resulted in death rates amongst the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population six times that of the non-Indigenous community and the need for ICU beds around eight times more. The risk factors for COVID 19 are greater and hence the impact is likely to be higher than for H1N1.

“With the whole-of-population death rate for COVID 19 estimated to be between 1 – 4 per cent, this could translate to a death rate of between 6 – 24 per cent or more for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Unchecked spread of the virus would also quickly overwhelm the health system, which is underprepared and under-resourced to cope with any surge in demand.

“Adopting jurisdiction-wide travel restrictions is also necessary for protecting remote communities due to the significant movement that occurs between urban, regional and remote Aboriginal communities, particularly to access health care, government services and affordable food.

“We need to minimise the potential for contact at urban and regional centres to spread the virus back to remote communities.

“This once-only opportunity we have to introduce a measure that can turn back the tide on this virus must not be missed”, Mr Paterson concluded.

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