



Health Ministers Meeting (HMM): *Communique* 23 February 2024

Health Ministers from Australian governments met in Melbourne on 23 February 2024 to discuss a range of important issues for Australia’s healthcare system. These include:

National COVID-19 Inquiry

Health Ministers met with Ms Robyn Kruk AO, the Chair of the independent Inquiry Panel into Australia’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministers were consulted on the key health response measures adopted throughout the pandemic and on steps to enhance national preparedness for a future pandemic. Ministers look forward to ongoing consultation with Ms Kruk and the COVID Inquiry Panel, and await the findings of the report.

NHRA Negotiations

In December 2023, National Cabinet directed Health Ministers to commence negotiations for the next National Health Reform Agreement. These negotiations have commenced, and Health Ministers discussed progress and key priorities for reform. Health Ministers noted National Cabinet’s agreement that the combined health and disability reforms will see all states and territories better off. Health Ministers committed to working together to deliver an updated agreement that will ensure a health system for the future that provides Australians with the best possible care, when and where they need it.

First Nations Health priorities

Health Ministers discussed the upcoming First Nations Health Roundtable which will focus on improving action under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and workforce as well as improving outcomes for First Nations people in the justice and health systems.

Long-stay older patients in acute care

Across Australia older patients are waiting to be discharged from hospital back to home or into an appropriate aged care facility. In December 2023, the Commonwealth committed to investing \$1.2 billion to continue strengthening Medicare and take pressure off hospitals. Health Ministers discussed additional initiatives to support pathways out of hospital. Health Ministers are committed to implementing solutions that safely reduce the time older patients are waiting in hospital, and to improve the care they receive on their transition into residential aged care where appropriate.

Health Workforce Taskforce

Health Ministers received an update on the important work of the Health Workforce Taskforce. The Taskforce aims to grow and strengthen the pool of healthcare workers in Australia, including by increasing training opportunities in Australia, and working with other countries to make Australia a destination of choice for overseas workers. Health Ministers agreed to work together to improve workforce mobility beginning with the nursing workforce. The Australian Government is working alongside the Indian Government with the input of the Health Workforce Taskforce to make it easier for highly trained workers based in India to transfer to Australia.

Vaping reforms

Health Ministers discussed positive progress of the reforms to protect Australians, particularly young people, from the harms of vaping. Prohibitions on the importation of vapes commenced on 1 January 2024, and will expand from 1 March 2024. The Federal Health Minister gave an update on legislation that will soon be introduced to the Federal Parliament to prevent domestic manufacture, advertisement, supply and commercial possession of non-therapeutic and disposable single use vapes to ensure comprehensive controls on vapes across all levels of the supply chain.

National Digital Health Strategy (2023-2028) and the Strategy Delivery Roadmap

Health Ministers welcome the publication of the National Digital Health Strategy (2023-2028). The Strategy is an essential building block for a future-focused, innovative health system that uses digital services to enhance the quality care patients receive. The Strategy is published here: <https://www.digitalhealth.gov.au/national-digital-health-strategy>.