

# 2023 FSRACA NATIONAL CONFERENCE

9–11 AUGUST 2023  
CENTREPIECE AT  
MELBOURNE PARK, VICTORIA

OUR TEAMS  
KICKING GOALS

## **Covid-19 Pandemic Response – Where to from here**

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As of late July 2023, almost 11.8 million cases of COVID-19 had been reported in Australia; the true number of infections would be much higher. More than 22,000 COVID-19 related deaths have been reported. Of these, 97% of cases and 89% of deaths have occurred since January 2022 when most preventive measures were suspended in most jurisdictions (except WA).

Like many countries, Australia was ill-prepared for the arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in early 2020. A national pandemic preparedness plan was developed in 2006; however, only two simulation exercises were conducted, the last in 2008. NSW, with its 15 health districts, was better prepared than Victoria, with its highly centralised structure, for contact tracing and community engagement.

Despite central bodies such as National Cabinet and the AHPPC, there was no consistent approach to surveillance, non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) and quarantine across states and territories. A high proportion of cases were acquired in hospitals reflecting inadequate PPE and case management policies. The situation in some residential aged care facilities was dismal with unnecessarily high case and death rates.

Initially, NPIs were based on previous respiratory infection outbreaks but Australia was slow to incorporate new research, in particular the evidence of airborne transmission, which was initially resisted by some public health experts.

There needs to be a rigorous national evaluation of the Australian response to COVID-19, which should inform a new pandemic preparedness strategy that is frequently reviewed and tested by simulation exercises. The recently established Australian CDC should lead the way to establish consistent policies and approaches across the nation to a future pandemic, especially surveillance, research analysis, prevention and communication with a strong emphasis on community engagement.