



A pandemic emerges

With the announcement of an outbreak of infection from a novel coronavirus in late 2019, NSW Health began to prepare for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drive-through testing clinic at Prestons, NSW.

The first four cases in NSW were identified in Sydney in late January 2020 and new COVID-19 protocols were followed to isolate infected people and quarantine their contacts.

NSW Health responds

The NSW Government's response built on previous pandemic planning informed by lessons from severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and H1N1 influenza.

On 21 January 2020, NSW Health established the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC) to:

- ✓ undertake case follow-up and outbreak investigation, close contact tracing and high-risk-setting responses
- ✓ follow-up on pathology testing and liaise with laboratories
- ✓ promote compliance with isolation and quarantine requirements via public communications
- ✓ review and analyse data, and provide epidemiology expertise and intelligence.

The PHEOC drew staff from health services, government agencies, universities, and former employees, hiring more than 150 contact tracers and rapidly redeploying 30 public health officers and 17 biostatistics trainees.

The State Health Emergency Operations Centre (SHEOC) was established on 17 March 2020, to enact, operationalise and implement public health orders and help our local health districts and networks to:

- build critical care and emergency department capacity
- establish COVID-19 testing clinics
- coordinate the supply of personal protective equipment.

NSW Health established 30 multidisciplinary clinical Communities of Practice across key clinical specialties from aged care and intensive care to virtual care, with representation from all networks and districts, to:

- ✓ support clinicians to network and share strategies
- ✓ identify, prioritise and escalate issues and solutions requiring a system response
- ✓ provide expert clinical advice, and share advice and resources to all districts and networks.

The SHEOC team worked closely with Sydney Local Health District and the NSW Police to establish hotel quarantine in March 2020 to support more than 31,000* returning residents and travellers. In addition, more than 2000* people were cared for in Special Health Accommodation, dedicated to people with a positive COVID-19 test result as well as others who required medical or mental health support.

The Ministry regularly produced online content and webinars for physicians, health administrators, and other stakeholders, and implemented strategies to increase workforce capacity and ensure the workforce had the skills and capabilities to respond to a significant increase in COVID-19 cases.

Key strategies included:

- workforce surge capacity workshops
- aged care support workforce plans
- engagement with private hospitals to identify capacity and support
- supporting the graduation of the 2020 student workforce.

*As at 30 June 2020.

Districts and networks take action to keep our citizens safe

Districts and networks quickly moved to set up emergency operations centres and testing clinics, including onsite, pop-up and drive-through clinics. All districts:

- ✓ established alternative models of care using telehealth and videoconferencing to provide virtual consultations
- ✓ increased emergency department and intensive care unit capacity
- ✓ ensured appropriate staffing levels and upskilled staff in COVID-19 education programs
- ✓ secured critical supplies, including ventilators and personal protective equipment.

The health system surges in response to the pandemic

Each pillar agency, network and local health district, together with the Ministry, had a role to play, working collaboratively to provide a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach to the crisis.

The Critical Intelligence Unit — provided rapid, evidence-based advice to inform and support critical decision making. The Unit focused on systems intelligence, clinical intelligence, and evidence integration, supported by staff and data from the Agency for Clinical Innovation, the Ministry, eHealth NSW, Cancer Institute NSW and others.

The Agency for Clinical Innovation — led 12 Communities of Practice, leveraging clinical networks and mobilising clinical leadership.

eHealth NSW — created COVID-19-specific dashboards, providing comparable data and analytics across the NSW public health system.

Health Infrastructure — focused on maximising bed supply, identifying other accommodation including hotels, and preparing additional capacity including temporary hospitals.

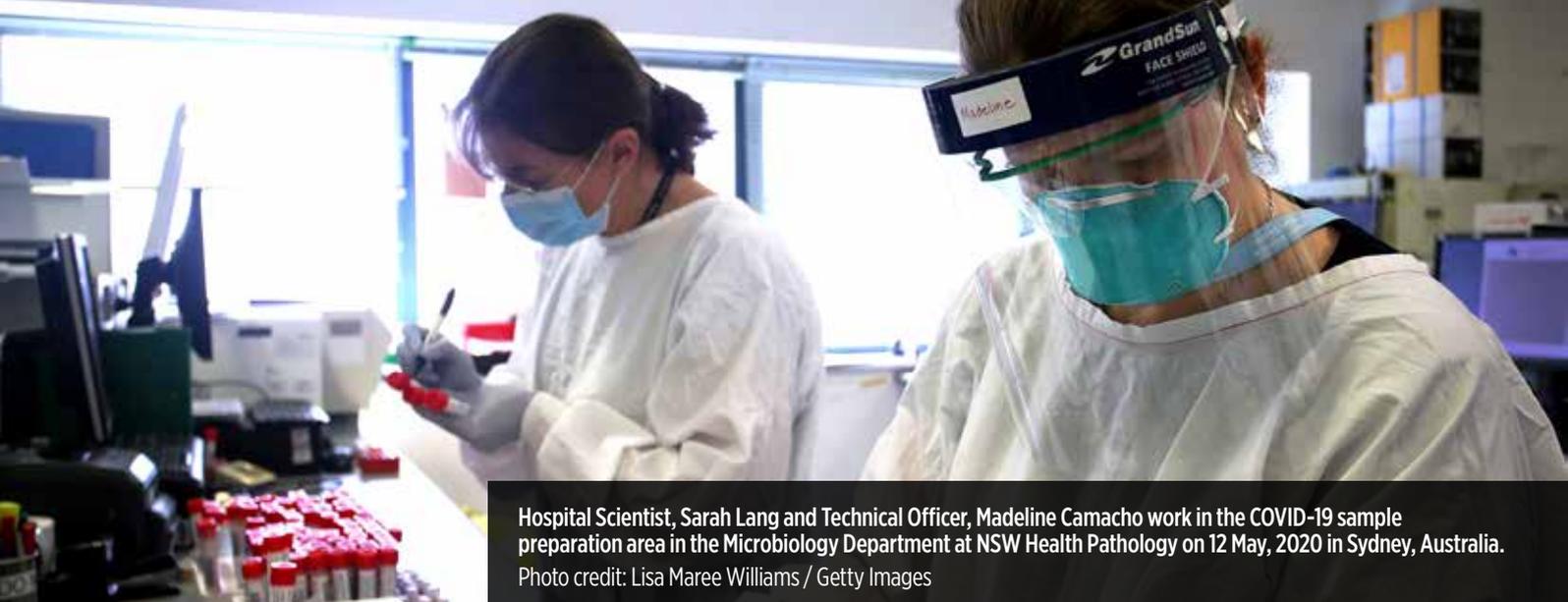
HealthShare NSW — supplied personal protective equipment to COVID-19 clinics, airports, quarantine hotels and hospitals; and meals, transport and linen for returned travellers in hotel quarantine.

NSW Health Pathology — established COVID-19 specialist diagnostic testing at 12 dedicated laboratories, and evaluated and deployed new rapid testing platforms to 37 laboratories across NSW.

NSW Ambulance — brought forward the training of 180 paramedics to join the workforce by April 2020.

The Centre for Aboriginal Health — established a dedicated COVID-19 team to support Aboriginal organisations and communities; planning and managing responses to food security, travel restrictions, self-isolation, and health messaging, ensuring that culturally safe responses were embedded in local outbreak management plans, and supporting Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services with COVID-19 testing, access to personal protective equipment, and clinical advice.

The Clinical Excellence Commission — formed a COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control Response Team in March 2020 and engaged two additional specialist infectious disease and infection control experts. The Commission provided infection control and prevention advice to the aged care sector and was represented on all 30 Communities of Practice, taking the lead on Infection Prevention and Control and Infectious Diseases.



Hospital Scientist, Sarah Lang and Technical Officer, Madeline Camacho work in the COVID-19 sample preparation area in the Microbiology Department at NSW Health Pathology on 12 May, 2020 in Sydney, Australia. Photo credit: Lisa Maree Williams / Getty Images

Making mental health a priority

NSW Health recognised the mental health impact caused by public health interventions and controls, and the cumulative and ongoing impact of isolation, uncertainty and economic hardship. The NSW Government invested an extra \$80 million in mental health supports to improve community wellbeing; strengthening mental health services by providing targeted and practical measures.

These comprised:

- ✓ recruiting more than 180 additional community-based mental health clinicians and peer support workers to support vulnerable populations
- ✓ expanded virtual mental health services in all local health districts
- ✓ enhanced capacity and responsiveness of the 1800 NSW Mental Health Line
- ✓ expansion of the Police Ambulance Clinical Early Response (PACER) program to 12 additional Police Area Commands
- ✓ therapeutic activities in acute inpatient units
- ✓ free access to Tresillian's SleepWellBaby program
- ✓ support for homeless people living with mental illness
- ✓ a peer support line for people with mental illness
- ✓ training and certification of additional psychiatric assistance dogs
- ✓ boosting the capacity of Lifeline
- ✓ additional funding to Gidget Foundation to boost perinatal mental health support.

The response to the pandemic continues

By 30 June 2020, NSW Health had carried out more than 929,000 COVID-19 tests, with 3208 confirmed cases including interstate residents in NSW healthcare facilities, and 51 COVID-19 related deaths from confirmed cases in NSW.

NSW Health Pathology had achieved a testing rate of 5000 to 10,000 tests per day, and pioneered the automated delivery of negative COVID-19 results, providing SMS results to more than 300,000 people within 24 to 72 hours of lab testing.

NSW Health continues to implement measures to limit the risk of transmission; maintaining high testing numbers, rapid case identification, contact tracing, education, infection control and system capacity, along with delivering care and supporting the wellbeing of patients with COVID-19.

How the health system supported care

- Testing clinics established at more than 230 locations, including drive-through and pop-up sites.
- Thousands of staff redeployed, seconded and recruited across the state.
- 929,000 COVID-19 tests conducted.
- Automated delivery of negative COVID-19 results pioneered, providing SMS results to more than 300,000 people.
- Contact tracers across NSW identified and supported more than 24,000 close contacts associated with 3208 positive cases.
- More than 2300 nurses upskilled in intensive care from March to June 2020.
- More than 350 new ventilators delivered for use in NSW public hospitals.
- 226 personal protective equipment (PPE) clinical product assessments conducted.
- A direct PPE advice line provided to local health districts.
- 30 multidisciplinary clinical Communities of Practice established.
- \$80 million invested by the NSW Government in mental health supports.
- More than 180 mental health clinicians and peer-support workers recruited.
- 55 new resources on COVID-19 downloaded more than 200,000 times.