

# An ongoing pandemic



Throughout 2020-21, NSW Health's COVID-19 pandemic response evolved and adapted as several infection outbreaks developed in Sydney and some regional areas of the state. We completed 6.15 million COVID-19 tests to the end of June 2021 and started a mammoth vaccination rollout following the launch of our first mass vaccination centre in May 2021.

As we responded to the challenges of COVID-19, we also optimised our close relationships with culturally diverse and at-risk communities at a local health district level, engaging with community leaders to further increase awareness of the risks of infection, encouraging testing and highlighting the benefits of vaccination.

Throughout the year, our committed and highly skilled staff have worked to solve the many complex challenges that COVID-19 has presented to all areas of NSW Health and they deserve full credit for their dedication.

## COVID-19 response by numbers

The pandemic stretched the NSW healthcare system but our staff across the state were there to listen and respond to the community's needs and develop innovative solutions.

Each part of NSW Health worked collectively to provide care as it was needed and this year's statistics speak volumes to the breadth and depth of work undertaken. Throughout the year there were:

- **2473** COVID-19 cases to the end of June 2021, including **1387** acquired overseas and **1086** acquired in NSW or interstate
- **6.15 million** COVID-19 tests completed at over **350** testing clinics
- **503,478** saliva screen tests for hotel quarantine workers
- **2,475,199** people registered for the COVID-19 SMS results service which saved **423,000** hours in calls
- **851,400** vaccinations administered by NSW Health between 22 February and end June 2021
- **704,352** individual meals provided to returning travellers in quarantine
- more than **600** close contact tracers trained to meet demand
- **\$80 million** in funding announced to enhance mental health services during the pandemic
- over **1500** resources created in more than **60** languages
- over **18,000** calls received a month to the Mental Health Line.

When overseas travellers were returning to Australia, NSW Health was among the first agencies to look after them. As part of the response, a range of care was provided, with NSW Health responsible for meals, check-ins and transport. As a result:

- **1905** travellers were transported from the airport to hotel quarantine
- an additional **287** travellers were taken from the airport to hospital for treatment
- **3093** patients were moved between quarantine hotels due to their changing COVID-19 status
- **467** weekly audits of quarantine hotels were completed since January 2021
- **842** people who were unable to isolate at home were provided care in hotel quarantine.

Patient experience remained a priority, even when face-to-face contact was not possible. Innovative solutions to keep patients, their families and clinicians connected included:

- **30,105** telehealth consultations via myVirtualCare with **3128** clinicians connected and over **60** resources developed to support its uptake by patients
- **1800** iPads distributed statewide so patients could communicate with family members while receiving care for COVID-19 when they were unable to have visitors.

Educators, researchers and trainers used their skills to expand NSW Health staff's knowledge and understanding of COVID-19, generating new ideas and local solutions to what they encountered during the pandemic.

Training, education and research during COVID-19 has been an important part of the work NSW Health has delivered. In 2020-21:

- more than **\$28 million** was invested into COVID-19 research including **\$4.5 million** on emergency priority research projects for urgent investigation of transmission in schools and aged care facilities, and **\$8 million** towards **17 research projects**
- almost **100** guidance documents and local solutions were created by more than **3500** clinicians as part of the **30** clinical Communities of Practice
- more than **650** Intensive Care Paramedics were educated through a COVID-19 update program.

Getting health messages out quickly to the community has been a crucial part of NSW Health's response to COVID-19 to help stop the spread. In particular, digital communications have grown, including:

- **1.5 million** webpage views and more than **250,000** downloads of COVID-19 resources on the NSW Health website, including content in community languages
- **400** integrated data dashboards produced by the Critical Intelligence Unit, **250** daily digests of academic literature, **100** topic-specific evidence checks and **50** weekly reports on risk levels and international data.

## Our mental health response

The NSW Government provided funding for a strengthened package of services specifically to support the mental health and wellbeing of NSW residents impacted by public health orders and other measures to ensure their safety during the pandemic.

Initiatives included in the NSW Government's \$80 million mental health support package:

- recruitment of additional specialist community mental health clinicians and peer support staff working with vulnerable populations
- virtual mental health services expanded to connect clinical settings to assess and treat mental health clients remotely. This allowed mental health clinicians to connect with individual mental health consumers in a community setting and the extension helped link them with clinical information and resources
- funding to Lifeline and the Mental Health Line to ensure these vital services were equipped to respond to the increased needs of the community.

## Vulnerable populations

Funding was granted in late 2020 to local health districts based on both need and demographics for Assertive Community Care to help focus on providing care in the community rather than in hospital. This followed the program's success in deploying 180 additional specialists, community-based mental health clinicians and peer support workers.

These health professionals worked in a range of clinical areas including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Intellectual Disability, Forensic Mental Health, Aboriginal Mental Health, and Older Persons Mental Health. More than \$66 million in funding will be invested over three years, beginning in 2021-22.

This funding will allow for additional mental health clinicians to care for patients in the community which will significantly enhance the capacity of services across the state.



## Virtual mental health

Remote technology remains one way our clinicians can remain connected with their patients when face-to-face services are limited. As a result, renewed funding was announced which will allow local health districts to enhance their equipment and increase staffing to meet patient needs.

More than \$50 million in funding was announced over three years beginning in 2021-22 to provide technology and expand telehealth services. This boost enables more access to mental health support for people in immediate crisis in metropolitan and regional NSW.

## Mental Health Line

NSW Health services have responded to over 18,000 calls a month this year and funding for the Mental Health Line will continue. Despite receiving these high call numbers, performance improved significantly.

## New facilities and services

### Increasing surveillance at a population level

NSW Health began using sewage surveillance as a critical response tool to ensure new COVID-19 cases and outbreaks were quickly identified. This award-winning collaboration with Sydney Water began in mid-2020 in regional NSW. Throughout 2020-21, sewage surveillance expanded, covering more than 80 per cent of the NSW population as part of a regular reporting mechanism.

The world-first research program has achieved global significance, testing untreated sewage for fragments of SARS-CoV-2 virus at more than 60 sewage treatment plants across NSW.

The program has provided critical intelligence to understand COVID-19 in communities, inform the public health response and build preparedness for future disease outbreaks, along with helping to keep NSW safe during the pandemic.

NSW Health funded the sampling of materials, courier costs, analysis and research on sequencing, variants of concern and more efficient sample collection methods.

## Ramping up the vaccine rollout

Vaccinations were first offered to priority groups as determined by the Australian Government, including staff from healthcare, emergency services, quarantine, border workers and their households. Bookings were then opened to administer vaccines to the public as the population eligible for vaccination in the rollout expanded.

The first NSW mass vaccination centre opened in May 2021 at Sydney Olympic Park, with initial capacity to administer up to 5000 vaccines a day.

The centre initially operated six days per week, from 8am to 8pm, with the outstanding 300-person workforce at Sydney Olympic Park making the vaccine ramp-up possible, including 200 registered nurses and midwives.

Due to the success of the centre, planning efforts continued to open further mass vaccination centres in July and August 2021.



## Delivering COVID-19 test results

NSW undertook record levels of testing in 2020-21 with 6.15 million COVID-19 completed tests in the reporting period. NSW Health Pathology launched a secure SMS service to deliver COVID-19 test results to people who were tested in NSW public hospitals or COVID-19 clinics.

Over 2.4 million people registered for the service, which halved the average waiting time for negative results and saved frontline healthcare workers 423,000 hours in calls. The service was the joint winner of the 2020 NSW Premier's Putting the Customer at the Centre Award and was acknowledged by *Harvard Business Review*.

## Scaling up our workforce to meet case surges

The Health Education and Training Institute (HETI) trained more than 600 close contact tracers, after designing and delivering a rolling program of rapid online training in readiness for infection rate surges. The innovative training program was a collaboration between HETI and the Centre for Population Health and was recognised as a finalist in the Recovery and Resilience category of the 2020 Premier's Awards.

Video recordings of the virtual training have been made available to Public Health Unit teams across local health districts and have been shared with Victoria's Department of Health and Human Services to support essential training for its close contact tracers.

## Digitalising care

The Agency for Clinical Innovation, in partnership with eHealth NSW, implemented myVirtualCare statewide in September 2020, creating more accessible healthcare during the pandemic.

MyVirtualCare is a custom-built, web-based videoconferencing platform that helps patients, healthcare providers and carers to access and manage care. The platform extends clinicians' virtual capability, providing enhanced functionality that mimics critical workflow.

Uptake of the platform has been significant, with the statewide rollout connecting 3148 clinicians and more than 30,000 consultations.

For patients, their families and carers, myVirtualCare provided a seamless and convenient way to access their clinical and social care providers using one web link on any internet-enabled device, reducing the need for patients to travel to healthcare services. Patients receiving care for cancer, palliative, nutrition and dietetics, pain, mental health and speech and rehabilitation services were among the participants.

## Breaking records in our efforts to recover elective surgeries

NSW Health has remained focused on fast-tracking surgeries delayed following the National Cabinet decision to suspend all non-urgent and most semi-urgent surgery in 2020, due to the pandemic.

Public hospitals throughout NSW hit milestones in 2020-21, in an effort to recover surgeries and provide the best possible healthcare to the residents of NSW.

An investment of an additional \$458.5 million by the NSW Government sped up access to surgery for patients who had their surgery delayed. This was made possible through increased collaboration between public hospitals and private providers.

In the July to September 2020 quarter, more elective surgeries were performed than in any other quarter in the last five years, with almost 100 per cent of urgent surgery performed on time and almost 65,000 elective surgeries performed. This is an increase of 2581 (4.0 per cent) when compared with the same quarter in 2019. The public waiting list reduced to 95,000 at the end of the September, compared with 101,000 at the end of the previous quarter.

In the October to December 2020 quarter, 62,000 procedures were recorded, the highest number of elective surgeries ever performed in an October to December quarter, and an almost eight per cent increase compared with the same period in 2019.

In the January to March 2021 quarter, NSW Health achieved another milestone, a five-year performance record in the number of elective surgeries performed in any first quarter with 58,044 procedures, an increase of 7065 (13.9 per cent) compared with the same quarter in 2020, and 99.6 per cent of urgent elective surgeries were performed on time.

In the April to June 2021 quarter, 64,599 elective surgeries were performed, representing an increase of 5330 (nine per cent) compared with the same quarter in 2019 and the highest number ever recorded in an April to June quarter. In partnership with private hospitals, NSW Health also reduced the number of people on the elective surgery waiting list at the end of the quarter by over 15 per cent, from 101,024 a year earlier to 85,296 at the end of June 2021. Of those people, 2108 had waited longer than the clinically recommended timeframe, down from 10,563 at the end of June 2020.

## On the ground – local health districts and networks

### Improving COVID-19 testing at Northern NSW Local Health District

Clinics in Northern NSW introduced a new process involving personalised Quick Response (QR) codes, supporting patients to register faster for COVID-19 test results through a simple scan on a smartphone.

A project team involving NSW Health Pathology, eHealth NSW and Clinical Information System teams from Northern NSW Local Health District worked for months to develop the localised technology and systems to support the improved registration method.

Four hospital testing clinics in the local health district rolled out the QR process in February 2021, reducing both the time taken for a patient to register for the SMS result notification, and the possibility of data being incorrect or mismatched. It also simplified the registration process, offering a one-step scan, rather than patients having to enter multiple pieces of information over a series of text messages.

For culturally or linguistically diverse patients, the QR codes also helped to reduce barriers when registering to receive their results via SMS.

### Supporting our most vulnerable at St Vincent's Health Network

St Vincent's Health Network in collaboration with the City of Sydney, St Vincent de Paul Society and other frontline non-government organisations established a vaccination clinic for people experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness or living in social housing in Woollahroo.

The clinic opened in May 2021 to provide equitable access to COVID-19 vaccinations without bookings and administered more than 1000 vaccinations to the end of June 2021.

## Engaging with communities

The Centre for Aboriginal Health supported the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to deliver tailored COVID-19 communications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, including leading the 'Keep Our Mob Safe' campaign, messaging on COVID-safe behaviour, restrictions and vaccinations.

Communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse communities became even more important in 2020-21. The NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service provided a range of content including social media, videos, fact sheets and multicultural media coverage to connect with the state's diverse communities.

Pandemic health messages were translated into more than 50 languages on the website and NSW Health worked with multicultural and religious leaders to share information and encourage vaccination.

In addition, frontline healthcare staff working in south-western Sydney, one of Australia's most multiculturally diverse communities, shared their own language skills in an area where 51 per cent of residents speak a language other than English at home and more than 44 per cent of the population was born overseas. To connect with the local community in their own languages and answer questions about COVID-19, South Western Sydney Local Health District's multicultural nurses and health workers spoke in Vietnamese, Arabic, Hindi and Assyrian at local shopping centres.



## Working together

### The health system surges in response to the pandemic

All parts of NSW Health had a role to play, working collaboratively to provide a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach to the crisis.

**Personal protective equipment** – HealthShare NSW maintained the supply to COVID-19 clinics, airports, quarantine hotels and hospitals; and meals, transport and linen for returned travellers in hotel quarantine.

**Research funding** – the Office for Health and Medical Research invested \$28 million to generate research evidence to support the COVID-19 pandemic response.

**System and clinical intelligence** – 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.

**Health data** – the Centre for Epidemiology and Evidence provided daily case, testing and vaccination data to the health system and public.

**Health and Social Policy** – collaborated with the Australian Government Department of Health and the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission to develop and update the protocol to support joint management of a COVID-19 outbreak in one or more residential aged care facilities in NSW.

**Strategic Reform and Planning** – continued to implement strategies to reduce the impact of COVID-19 in the community through clinician engagement and Communities of Practice.

**System Information and Analytics** – produced analytical tools to model the impact of COVID-19 on intensive care units demand and communal disease transmission, and the NSW Vaccination Program.

**System management** – the State Health Emergency Operations Centre led the implementation of strategies to reduce the impact of COVID-19, including increasing intensive care unit capacity, managing and distributing medical equipment such as ventilators, supporting the operation of COVID-19 testing clinics, the NSW Hotel Quarantine and Airport Program in collaboration with other NSW Government agencies and establishing a large network of over 100 vaccination clinics, including mobile outreach locations, across the state.

**Workforce Planning and Talent Development** – expanded the Workplace Culture and Safety Action Plan to include a range of COVID-19-specific wellbeing initiatives to greater support NSW Health staff.

**Workplace Relations** – provided work health and safety advice and established a dedicated enquiries team to manage issues arising from the pandemic, including safety and wellbeing considerations.

**Infection prevention and control** – the Clinical Excellence Commission developed resources and supported the NSW Hotel Quarantine and Airport Program Quality Assurance Program.

**Enhanced training** – NSW Ambulance staff were provided with training and protocols to ensure patient safety while maintaining clinical quality.

**Financial Services and Asset Management** – provided a range of key support functions including administering additional funding for COVID-19 response and related reporting with the Commonwealth and NSW Treasury, and supporting procurement governance throughout the pandemic.

