

Morrison government bans indoor gatherings of 100 people, and tells Australians 'don't go overseas'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

The federal government's new sweeping measures in the coronavirus crisis include a ban on non-essential indoor gatherings of 100 people or more, advice that no Australian should travel abroad, and strict restrictions on visitor access to aged care facilities.

The measures, announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison early Wednesday, take the battle to contain the spread of the virus to a new level but do not include the closure of the nation's schools, or foreshadow a general community shutdown.

Morrison said the second stage economic package the government is now working on would be to "cushion" the impact of the measures put in place - it would focus on strengthening the "safety net" for individuals and small businesses.

He said there had been a big "gear change" at the weekend "when we were moving to far more widespread social distancing and bans on gatherings".

Morrison berated hoarders in the strongest language. "Stop doing it. It's ridiculous. It's un-Australian[...]also, do not abuse staff. We're all in this together. People are doing their jobs."

"They're doing their best, whether they're at a testing clinic this morning, whether they're at a shopping centre."

Travel advice has been lifted to the highest level - which is unprecedented - with Australians, regardless of their destination, age or health, being told they should not travel overseas.

The new measures, which were approved late Tuesday night by the federal-state "national cabinet", also include the cancellation of ANZAC Day events, which was mostly an endorsement of action already taken by the RSL. There will be a national service, but without a crowd. Small streamed ceremonies involving officials at state level may be held

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“Life is changing in Australia, as it is changing all around the world,” Morrison told a Canberra news conference in which he and Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy stood the required social distance apart.

“Life is going to continue to change,” he said, but he also stressed the need to keep the country operating.

Morrison emphasised that measures had to be for the long term because the crisis was set to last at least six months.

Murphy said “a short-term two to four week shut down of society is not recommended by any of our experts. It does not achieve anything. We have to be in this for the long haul.”

On the sensitive issue of the schools, on which there’s been a lot of pressure for closure, Morrison highlighted his own family.

“I am telling you that, as a father, I’m happy for my kids to go to school. There’s only one reason your kids shouldn’t be going to school and that is if they are unwell.”

The advice from health experts, and the view of the premiers and chief ministers has been that schools should be kept open. Morrison said that closure would mean a “30% impact on the availability of health workers.”

The government has also decided that 20,000 international student nurses who are in Australia will be able to stay to help with the local crisis.

Aged cared facilities will not ban visits but will put in place restrictions to protect residents, who form the most high risk portion of the population. Morrison, who recently lost his own father, said he knew these would be difficult for families.

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Visits will be restricted to a maximum of two people at any one time a day and no large group visits or social activities will be allowed

There will be special arrangements for the families of end-of-life patients.

The human biosecurity emergency provision of the Biosecurity Act was put into force early Wednesday. This gives draconian powers to the federal government, and the action matches the state governments' emergency declarations.

Morrison said the advice was that plane travel within the country did not present a high risk - the risk was where people had come from and were going to. People are told not to visit remote communities, to protect vulnerable indigenous citizens.

The ban on non-essential indoor gatherings of more than 100 excludes a range of places such as shopping centres; public transport; medical and healthcare facilities; office buildings; factories; construction sites, and mining sites.

States and territories are looking at rules for non-essential indoor gatherings of fewer than 100 people, such as cinemas, restaurants, clubs, weddings, and funerals. This will be considered when the national cabinet meets on Friday. There may be significant changes to the operation of these facilities, such as decreasing maximum capacity, or increasing space available.

The beleaguered aviation industry is being promised relief, with a waiver of fees and charges.

Both Morrison and Murphy strongly reinforced the need for "social distancing"

Murphy said "it is every individual Australian's responsibility to practice good social distancing. Keep away from each other where possible. Practice really good hand hygiene."

“No more handshaking. No more hugging - except in your family.”

So far, 80,000 tests have been conducted, and the government is sourcing further testing kits.

Full press release from The Prime Minister's office can be read below

The focus for the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments is the health and wellbeing of Australians and their livelihoods, ensuring that Australia is positioned to emerge strong and resilient from this global pandemic crisis.

Leaders met last night for the second National Cabinet meeting and agreed to further actions to protect the Australian community from the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

General Population - Indoor Gatherings

As part of our efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Australia, the National Cabinet has accepted further restrictions on gatherings.

The National Cabinet has accepted the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) advice that non-essential indoor gatherings of greater than 100 people (including staff) will no longer be permitted from Wednesday 18 March 2020.

An indoor gathering refers to a gathering within a single enclosed area (i.e. an area, room or premises that is or are substantially enclosed by a roof and walls, regardless of whether the roof or walls or any part of them are permanent, temporary, open or closed).

This does not apply to essential activities such as public transportation facilities, medical and health care facilities, pharmacies, emergency service facilities, correctional facilities, youth justice centres or other places of custody, courts or tribunals, Parliaments, food markets, supermarkets and grocery stores, shopping centres, office buildings, factories, construction sites, and mining sites, where it is necessary for their normal operation (although other social distancing and hygiene practices may be required in these settings). The states and territories

will give further consideration to practical guidance and rules for non-essential indoor gatherings of fewer than 100 people (including staff) such as cinemas, theatres, restaurants/cafes, pubs, clubs, weddings and funerals. This will be considered at the next National Cabinet meeting on Friday 20 March 2020. In the meantime these venues should continue to apply social distancing and hygiene practices.

This includes being able to maintain a distance of 1.5 metres between patrons. Hand hygiene products and suitable waste receptacles need to be available, with frequent cleaning and waste disposal.

This may require significant changes to the operation of some venues, such as reducing the maximum capacity or increasing the space available.

Settings like gyms, indoor fitness centres and swimming pools are not required to close at this time providing they meet these requirements for social distancing and hand hygiene. Such venues should take actions to ensure regular high standards of environmental cleaning take place.

General Population - Outdoor Gatherings

Outdoor events of fewer than 500 attendees may proceed. There are general measures that all events should follow, including:

In a given occupied space, there must be no more than one person per four square metres of ground space.

Availability of hand hygiene products and suitable waste receptacles, with frequent cleaning and waste disposal.

Food markets are exempt from the 500 person limit, however must undertake additional measures, such as control of patronage level numbers or stall density reduction to decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

There may be other gatherings that are considered essential and it is at the discretion of the individual state and territory Chief Medical Officers or equivalent to assess each on their merits, and determine whether they can continue if mitigated by social distancing measures.

Domestic Transport

National Cabinet agreed that all Australians should only consider travelling when it is essential. If unwell, people must stay at home, unless seeking medical care.

National Cabinet agreed that public transport is essential and that AHPPC advice should apply in relation to public transport (trains, trams, buses, ferries), taxi and ride share vehicles and transport of vulnerable populations, with particular attention given to cleaning and hygiene.

National Cabinet agreed that domestic air travel is low risk. The issue of where people are travelling to and sensitive locations where travel should be restricted, will be developed with advice of states and territories.

The National Cabinet will further consider social distancing arrangements for domestic transport at its next meeting on Friday 20 March 2020.

In all cases, appropriate social distancing and hygiene practices should be applied.

Anzac Day

Anzac Day is an important commemoration where we demonstrate our respect and admiration for Anzacs past and present. But the way we commemorate Anzac Day this year will need to change.

The National Cabinet has agreed that Anzac Day ceremonies and events should be cancelled due to the high proportion of older Australians who attend such events and the increased risk posed to such individuals. A small streamed/filmed ceremony involving officials at a state level may be acceptable. There should be no marches.

All Australian-led international Anzac Day Services will be cancelled for 2020 given international travel restrictions and restrictions on public gatherings.

The Australian War Memorial will aim to conduct a national televised Dawn Service with no general public attendance.

State and Territory Governments and the RSLs will work together on local community arrangements to commemorate Anzac Day.

Recommendation on bulk purchase of supplies

The National Cabinet has strongly endorsed the AHPPC advice against the bulk purchase of foods, medicines and other goods.

We strongly discourage the panic purchase of food and other supplies. While some advice has been provided to have a small addition of long shelf life products in the case of illness there are a range of mechanisms in place to support people in self-isolation, including food and other deliveries. AHPPC notes that the risk of individual Australians being asked to quarantine in coming weeks is low, and encourages individuals to plan with friends and family in the event of the need to isolate. We recognise the importance of supply lines to remote communities.

Aged Care and Older Australians

As the transmission of COVID-19 increases rapidly, it is our priority to protect and support elderly and vulnerable Australians. Aged care is a critical sector that faces staffing challenges as existing staff are either subject to self-isolation requirements due to COVID-19 or are unable to attend work.

The National Cabinet has agreed to the recommendations by the AHPPC to enhanced arrangements to protect older Australians in Residential Aged Care Facilities and in the community

Restrictions on entry into aged care facilities

The following visitors and staff (including visiting workers) should not be permitted to enter the facility:

Those who have returned from overseas in the last 14 days; Those who have been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the last 14 days; Those with fever or symptoms of acute respiratory infection (e.g. cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath); and Those who have not been vaccinated against influenza (after 1 May) Visitors

Aged care facilities should implement the following measures for restricting visits and visitors to reduce the risk of transmission to residents, including:

Limiting visits to a short duration; Limiting visits to a maximum of two immediate social supports (family members, close friends) or professional service or advocacy at one time, per day; Visits should be conducted in a resident's room, outdoors, or in a specific area designated by the aged care facility, rather than communal areas where the risk of transmission to residents is greater; No large group visits or gatherings, including social activities or entertainment, should be permitted at this time; No school groups of any size should be allowed to visit aged care facilities. Visitors should also be encouraged to practise social distancing practices where possible, including maintaining a distance of 1.5 metres. Children aged 16 years or less must be permitted only by exception, as they are generally unable to comply with hygiene measures. Exemptions can be assessed on a case-by-case basis, for example, where the resident is in a palliative care scenario. Measures such as phone or video calls must be accessible to all residents to enable more regular communication with family members. Family and friends should be encouraged to maintain contact with residents by phone and other social communication apps, as appropriate. Managing illness in visitors and staff

Aged care facilities should advise all regular visitors and staff to be vigilant for illness and use hygiene measures including social distancing, and to monitor for symptoms of COVID-19, specifically fever and acute respiratory illness. They should be instructed to stay away when unwell, for their own and residents' protection.

Given the high vulnerability of this particular group, aged care facilities should request that staff and visitors provide details on their current health status, particularly presentation of symptoms consistent with COVID-19. Screening for fever could also be considered upon entry.

These additional measures should be implemented in order to better protect residents and prompt individuals entering the aged care facility to consider their current state of health prior to entry. Both individuals and management need to take responsibility for the health of visitors and staff at facilities to protect our most vulnerable community members.

These are the recommendations of the AHPPC, individual facilities may choose to implement additional measures as they see fit for their circumstances.

Symptomatic staff

Staff should be made aware of early signs and symptoms of COVID-19. Any staff with fever or symptoms of acute respiratory infection (e.g. cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath) should be excluded from the workplace and tested for COVID-19. Staff must report their symptoms to the aged care facility.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.health.gov.au/committees-and-groups/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc>

Schools

The National Cabinet has accepted the advice of the AHPPC that schools should remain open at this time.

Specifically the National Cabinet has agreed that “pre-emptive closures are not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention to prevent community transmission of COVID-19 at this time.”

National Cabinet also noted AHPPC advice that “More than 70 countries around the world have implemented either nationwide or localised school closures, at different times in the evolution of the local COVID-19 epidemic, however it should be noted the majority of these have not been successful in controlling the outbreak. Some of these countries are now considering their position in relation to re-opening schools.”

Boarding schools

The National Cabinet noted that boarding schools are “at high risk of transmission” and encouraged boarding schools and parents to “consider the risks versus the benefits of a student remaining in boarding school”.

Universities and other higher education centres

_The National Cabinet accepted the advice that university and higher education “should continue at this time” with risk mitigation measures, including working from home arrangements where effective. As with boarding schools, group student accommodation “presents a higher risk” that warrants consideration of “closing or reducing accommodation densities” if risk mitigation is not possible. _

Community Sport

The National Cabinet accepted advice from the AHPPC that community sporting activities could continue with involvement from essential participants (players, coaches, match officials, staff and volunteers involved in operations, and parents and guardians of participants).

This advice follows ongoing consultation with sporting organisations which has resulted in guidelines being prepared for community sporting organisations. The guidelines provide relevant advice on change room access, physical contact, travel, and social distancing and hygiene practices.

Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that contact sports have a greater risk of transmission than other sports, and as such, should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

All sporting codes should seek public health advice applicable to their codes, and take into account outdoor mass gathering issues.

Further work on Indigenous and NDIS Australia

Further work will be progressed by Friday 20 March 2020 and will include additional support for vulnerable Australians including indigenous communities and NDIS participants.

The Department of Social Services (DSS), National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) and NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission (NDIS Commission) are working together in preparation to respond to COVID-19 and its impact on the NDIS.

Additional measures

Commonwealth emergency powers

The National Cabinet noted that Commonwealth, States and Territories were implementing emergency powers under respective legislation in order to be able to deal with the spread of COVID-19 as quickly and flexibly as possible.

The Governor-General has accepted the Commonwealth Government's recommendation that he declare a "human biosecurity emergency" under the Biosecurity Act 2015 given the risks COVID-19 poses to human health and the need to control its spread in Australia.

That declaration would allow the Health Minister to issue targeted, legally enforceable directions and requirements to combat the virus.

The declaration was recommended by the Chief Medical Officer in his capacity as the Director of Human Biosecurity.

The first emergency requirement that will be made under the declaration is to formally prohibit international cruise ships from entering Australian ports for an initial 30 days, which provides additional legal support for the decision announced on Sunday 15 March 2020.

Additional Support for International Student Nurses

The Commonwealth Government will relax international student nurse visa work conditions to provide workforce continuity for aged care facilities, home care providers and other health care workers. This will allow international student nurses and other aged care workers to work more than the 40 hours a fortnight that they are currently. This measure will be examined on an ongoing basis. There are currently around 900 approved providers of residential aged care employers and around 1,000 approved providers of Home Care Packages. There are currently around 20,000 international student nurses studying in Australia.

Level 4 Travel restrictions - Do Not Travel

The National Security Committee of Cabinet has decided to raise the advice for all overseas travel to the highest level. Our advice to all Australians - regardless of your destination, age or health - is do not travel overseas at this time.

This our highest travel advice setting – Level 4 of 4.

The decision reflects the gravity of the international situation arising from the COVID-19 outbreak, the risks to health and the high likelihood of major travel disruptions.

We also now advise Australians who are overseas who wish to return to Australia, to do so as soon as possible by commercial means. Commercial options may quickly become limited.

Anyone arriving in Australia from overseas, including Australians citizens and permanent residents, will be required to self-isolate for 14 days from the date of arrival.

We have issued this advice for several reasons:

There may be a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 overseas. Health care systems in some countries may come under strain and may not be as well-equipped as Australia's or have the capacity to support foreigners. Overseas travel has become complex and unpredictable. Many countries are introducing entry or movement restrictions. These are changing often and quickly, and your travel plans could be disrupted. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will do what it can to provide consular advice and assistance, but DFAT's capacity to do so may be limited by local restrictions on movement, and the scale of the challenges posed by COVID-19. These challenges vary and the situation is changing rapidly.

Australians who cannot, or do not want to, return home should follow the advice of local authorities and minimise their risk of COVID-19 exposure by self-isolating.

Aviation Industry Support

The Commonwealth Government has announced an aviation package for the refunding and ongoing waiving of a range Government charges on the industry including aviation fuel excise, Airservices charges on domestic airline operations and domestic and regional aviation security charges.

These measures are in response to unprecedented and likely sustained period of falling international and domestic aviation demand related to the impact of COVID-19.

The total cost of the measures are estimated to be \$715 million, with an upfront estimated benefit of \$159 million to our airlines for reimbursement of applicable charges paid by domestic airlines since 1 February 2020.

The National Cabinet expressed their thanks to Australia's world-class health professionals for their continued efforts in restricting the spread of the virus and saving lives.

Leaders also thanked all Australians for playing their part in following the health guidance and complying with the strong measures in place to respond to COVID-19.

Leaders called on the community to remain calm. While there have been some temporary, localised food and grocery distribution delays, there are sufficient stocks in Australia. Violent or anti-social behaviour would not be tolerated.

As a National Cabinet, we will continue to come together as a united team to ensure our collective response remains proactive and targeted, but we all have a responsibility to each other in protecting our community.

All Australians must continue to be vigilant and play their part to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect vulnerable members of our community, including the elderly.

The National Cabinet urged Australians to continue to adhere to the health guidance on hygiene and personal social distancing, including avoiding any non-essential travel. Leaders also acknowledged the many businesses that have stepped up and allowed staff to work from home where practical. These early actions are critical in delaying the peak of the outbreak and ensuring our health system response remains strong.

The Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer, Professor Brendan Murphy, provided the National Cabinet with an overview of the current situation in Australia and overseas. The National Cabinet noted the continued development of international responses. Australia, like many other nations, is seeing an increase in community transmission. We are one of the best prepared nations and we remain united, focussed and ready to respond to any sustained escalation.

The National Cabinet also considered the Chief Medical Officer's advice on rates of community testing. More than 80,000 tests have already been undertaken in Australia. Further testing stocks have been secured and the Doherty Institute in Melbourne has developed an alternative testing process. This ensures Australia has a diverse range of tests and can protect supply of testing in the event there is a shortage in materials or components of some testing kits.

All Australians should continue to closely follow the expert medical advice – and ensure testing is only sought for COVID-19 where it meets the relevant clinical criteria. As we enter the colder months there may be a number of other viruses that enter our community, so there is a need to prioritise testing of people.

The National Cabinet noted that in order to protect older Australians and vulnerable communities in the weeks and months ahead, Australia may see even more restrictions put on social movements. We need all Australians to please look out for each other and to follow the medical advice.

The National Cabinet will be meeting again on Friday 20 March 2020 to discuss implementation arrangements for indoor gatherings and domestic transport.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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