

Media Release

The Hon Martin Foley MP
Minister for Health
Minister for Ambulance Services
Minister for Equality



Friday, 4 February 2022

\$1.4 BILLION INJECTION FOR HEALTHCARE OMICRON RESPONSE

Victoria's health system will be further strengthened with a vast range of new measures to support hardworking healthcare workers, treat patients in the community and get more paramedics on the road sooner.

A new \$1.4 billion package will ensure doctors, nurses and paramedics have the resources and support they need to continue caring for Victorians at home or in a hospital.

Public hospitals will share in \$938 million to help cover coronavirus-related costs, support dedicated front-line workers and continue surge payments for healthcare staff.

Victoria's PPE stockpile will get a \$161 million boost, through the supply of an extra 40 million N95 masks, 30 million surgical masks, 10 million gowns and 10 million face shields – bolstering the first line of defence for health staff.

More than \$30 million has been allocated for critical medicines and equipment used to treat patients, including pulse oximeters, humidifiers and air purifiers.

A further \$225 million will go towards easing the pressure on hospitals and ambulances, including:

- \$196 million to expand the *COVID Positive Pathways* program, which has helped more than half a million people safely recover at home since launching
- \$21 million to implement a state-wide virtual triage service, following a successful trial at Northern Hospital – which led to 87 per cent of virtually assessed patients avoiding transportation to hospital
- Almost \$8 million to fund eight additional GP respiratory clinics and establish five urgent care centres

To support Ambulance Victoria as it faces record demand, almost \$35 million will extend surge measures put in place last year, while the recruitment of 120 paramedics will be brought forward. It comes as 66 graduate paramedics officially join the ranks at stations across Victoria after finishing their four-week induction training.

A further \$11.5 million will be used to reduce the delay in discharging medically-well COVID-19 positive patients from hospital by improving patient transport across 13 sites.

Throughout this pandemic we have been monitoring the public health system to make sure that our hospitals, and hospital workers can safely manage the number of patients in hospital for COVID-19, while continuing other urgently needed care.

Now that hospitalisations have reduced to a 7 day average of 1000 - 800 cases in hospital, we are able to take the first steps on a plan towards resuming all elective surgeries.

Depending on case numbers and hospitalisations, the Minister for Health will consider resuming elective surgery in a number of steps, based on advice from the health sector and health experts. From Monday, 7 February, private hospitals and day procedure centres will be able to resume day surgery at up to 50 per cent of normal levels.

A return to normal elective surgery arrangements remains our goal as soon as it can be safely achieved. Subject to the continued decline of the rolling seven day average for hospitalisations to safe operating levels and formalising arrangements with private hospitals to have capacity to support the public health system for COVID-19 response as required, the Minister for Health will consider resuming more elective surgery - at up to 50 per cent in Melbourne and up to 75 per cent in regional areas.

When the average drops under 600 hospitalisations, the Minister will review the settings and consider if metropolitan public hospitals can resume some non-urgent elective surgery, pending an assessment of staff availability and furloughs.

The plan has been developed in consultation with public hospitals, private hospitals and surgeons – and balances the risks of deferred care with ensuring there is enough capacity to meet COVID-19 demand and address workforce pressures.

The funding package and elective surgery announcement come as new performance data highlights the challenges our healthcare continue to face – with EDs treating 460,963 patients in the three months to 31 December 2021, an increase of almost 13,000 on the same time the previous year.

Ambulance Victoria also experienced its busiest quarter on record, attending 91,397 Code 1 cases, which is a 16.2 per cent increase compared to the same time the previous year.

The number of Victorians waiting for elective surgery reached almost 81,000, while those most in need of urgent surgery were prioritised – with 99.6 per cent of Category 1 patients still seen within 30 days.

Quotes attributable to Minister for Health Martin Foley

“There’s no doubt that Omicron has put even more pressure on our health and ambulance services – and this package will help our health services provide the best possible care for Victorians.”

“Our doctors, nurses and paramedics have done a magnificent job as our front line of defence against the pandemic and we’re backing them by providing the support they deserve.”

“We understand that this has been a difficult time for people waiting for surgery. Bringing back private day procedures will help thousands of patients, while balancing the pressures on our healthcare system.”