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Contact:

The Honourable Mark McGowan MLA  
Premier of Western Australia  
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Dear Premier

## **MANDATORY VACCINATION OF HEALTH STAFF**

I am writing to further expand the recommendations that I made on 06 August 2021 and 01 September 2021, regarding mandatory vaccinations for health care and health support workers. On 06 August 2021, I recommended that, given the serious public health risk posed to staff, patients and other users of the health care system, the benefits of mandatory vaccination of health workers outweighed the risks and that this should be implemented by way of a Direction under the *Public Health Act 2016*. This has now been implemented with health care and health support workers at Tier 1 sites required to have had a COVID-19 vaccination (first dose) by 01 October 2021. This initial Tier was confined to health workers that work in high risk areas in public or private hospitals or in COVID testing or prevention specific settings, such as COVID clinics or vaccination centres. Two further Tiers will be implemented on 01 November 2021 and 01 December 2021, which will see this mandate more broadly applied to the hospital system and wider health services respectively, and full vaccination of the workforce.

The primary health and community health workforce represent a critical workforce, whose role in preventing disease, treating illness and optimising health in our community must be safeguarded. Due to frequent interactions with a large population base in the community, the primary health and community health workforce are at high risk of exposure and may be exposed to COVID-19 cases either knowingly or inadvertently. Transmission of COVID-19 in primary health and community health settings also has the potential to cause serious illness in the staff, major disruption to the provision of services, particularly if staff become unwell or are required to furlough, and transmission of COVID-19 to members of the community who attend these setting for health care.

Transmission in the primary health and community health setting may have major consequences within the community, including to those most at risk of severe disease associated with COVID-19. Health workers in community settings work closely with vulnerable groups, including the elderly and those with chronic disease or who are immunocompromised; these vulnerable groups are at high risk of serious sequelae from COVID-19 infection and include people who may not be able to be vaccinated themselves.

Members of the public seeking health care have an expectation that their health will not be further compromised while seeking the care they require.

Given their vital role in the community, the reliance by the community, particularly vulnerable groups, on those who work in such health care settings and the nature of the work that is undertaken, it is critical that the workforce in these settings be vaccinated. Often the nature of their work in the community settings means other mitigation measures, such as physical distancing and wearing of masks, cannot be maintained. While there is an expectation that all appropriate mitigation measures would be taken by health care providers, the community has no way of knowing if their health worker has the protection of a COVID vaccination. Vaccination therefore represents an important intervention for the prevention of transmission of COVID-19 to the workforce and to the community with whom the workforce interacts.

On 1 October 2021, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) published a Statement recommending that COVID-19 vaccinations should be mandated for all workers in health care settings, including those working in primary health care and community settings. The AHPPC Statement provides a national definition of relevant health care settings, which includes those in private provider facilities, such as general practitioners, private nurse offices and consulting offices, pharmacies, dental centres, allied health facilities and private pathology centres. This Statement was considered and endorsed by National Cabinet on 01 October 2021.

The intention of a nationally consistent approach is that it should include all health professions in these settings, including all those in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, all self-regulated allied health professions and all other individuals who are working in these settings. This covers a very broad range of practitioners working in primary health and community health settings, as well as the support staff that work in these facilities, even if they do not have direct patient contact. In my advice of 01 September 2021, I recommended that vaccination requirements should be imposed on all staff working in health care settings, regardless of direct patient contact, as there is still a risk of transmission between staff. This advice remains applicable for primary health and community health settings.

Staff with documented medical reasons for non-vaccination in the primary health and community health setting can apply for an exemption through the Australian Immunisation Register. Where a medical exemption is granted, these staff can be managed on a case-by-case basis by the employer to protect them from COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.

The introduction of mandatory vaccination for health workers has received strong support from a broad cross section of peak bodies representing primary health and community health practitioners. On 31 August 2021, the Australian Medical Association released a public statement in support of mandatory vaccines for all healthcare workers across the health care system. In September 2021, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) released a Position Statement that supported mandatory vaccination for health care workers. This was on the basis that it protects the workers who are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19, it better protects patients and other team members; and it reduces disruptions to health services. On 06 October 2021, the Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA) released a Position Statement that outlined their support for the AHPPC Statement on mandatory vaccination for all health workers, including allied health workers that are both

nationally registered and self-regulated. AHPA represents 21 national allied health association members and a further 14 affiliate members with close links to the allied health sector.

Mandatory vaccination requirements have become increasingly prevalent as the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified, due to the prevalence of the Delta strain. Several Australian jurisdictions have instituted mandatory COVID-19 vaccination for health care workers. In accordance with the AHPPC Statement, which recommended the mandatory vaccination of all health workers, including those working in various primary health and community health settings, it is anticipated that all jurisdictions will enact public health orders to ensure a nationally consistent approach to this important public health measure.

## **Recommendation**

The advice provided in my letters of 06 August 2021 and 01 September 2021 outlined the justification for mandatory vaccination for a health workforce working in public and private hospital and health service settings; however, this advice can be equally applied to health workers in these expanded settings of primary health and community health. I am, therefore, of the view, as the Chief Health Officer, that, for the reasons outlined above and in previous correspondence, the benefits outweigh the risks of mandatory vaccination for all health workers in primary health and community settings, and that the first dose of this mandatory vaccination should be implemented by 01 November 2021, which will bring it in line with the Tier 2 requirement in the current 'Health Worker (Restrictions on Access) Directions (No 3)'. This is broadly in line with the proposed 30 October 2021 date recommended in the AHPPC Statement. The second dose should be required by 01 December 2021, which is in line with the current Tier 3 requirements. I further recommend that mandatory vaccination be required by way of Directions issued under the *Public Health Act 2016*, either as an amendment to the current 'Health Worker (Restrictions on Access) Directions (No 3)' or as new Directions.

These Directions would not allow unvaccinated workers to enter or work in the designated primary health and community health settings, noting that this may include some businesses that are working in a supporting capacity to the health service, rather than delivering the health service directly. This approach allows choice by the individual not to take the vaccine and to work in either an alternative part of the organisation concerned or to seek other employment. All health workers should continue to be encouraged to voluntarily have the vaccine prior to the implementation of this mandate.

Yours sincerely



Dr Andy Robertson  
**CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER**

08 October 2021