

## **Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee**

### **Inquiry into the Queensland Government's health response to COVID-19**

#### **Summary of Asthma Australia's key points, July 2020**

##### **ABOUT ASTHMA AUSTRALIA**

Asthma Australia is a for-purpose, consumer organisation which has been improving the lives of people with asthma since 1962. Asthma affects one in nine Australians or 2.7 million people. Asthma is a lifelong inflammatory condition of the airways that restricts airflow. It can be fatal. There is no cure, but most people with asthma can experience good control.

Our purpose is to help people breathe better so they can live freely.

We operate across New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory, delivering evidence-based prevention and health strategies to more than half a million people each year. Asthma Australia works in partnership with the Asthma Foundations of Western Australia and the Northern Territory to deliver consistent services across the nation.

Our work is enabled by the financial support of governments and industry, as well as generous donations from the community, to provide free, accessible services to the community, cutting-edge research, effective healthcare programs, and advocacy.

##### **SUMMARY**

Asthma Australia welcomes the opportunity to give a summary of the key points we will make in our submission to the Inquiry into the Queensland Government's health response to COVID-19 by the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee.

People with asthma in Australia have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the available evidence suggesting most people with asthma are not at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. When the virus began to spread here, Asthma Australia experienced a marked increase in contacts from people with asthma,<sup>i</sup> and there were common themes in the concerns they shared. People with asthma told us they were worried about being at grave risk of COVID-19, faced interruptions in access to health care, had difficulty accessing vital medications, and felt profound fear, anxiety and other mental health impacts as a result of their circumstances.

To quantify these concerns, Asthma Australia conducted a survey of 1,805 people with asthma in April 2020, which was followed by weekly (and later fortnightly) surveys monitoring community sentiment.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Queensland Government, along with the Commonwealth Government and state and territory counterparts, has placed Queensland in the enviable position of largely suppressing COVID-19. However, the pandemic is ongoing and, as recent events in Melbourne show, there is still potential for further waves of infection. Additionally, COVID-19 is a novel virus and more research is needed into its impact, including on people with asthma.

In this summary, Asthma Australia provides an overview of the key findings from our surveys. We also share the areas we have identified for improvement in responses to potential future pandemics, which we will elaborate on in our forthcoming submission to this inquiry. We hope this summary, and the submission to follow, will help the Committee understand the impact of COVID-19, and the response to it by governments, on people with asthma.

## OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM ASTHMA AUSTRALIA'S SURVEYS

### Asthma Australia Survey of People with Asthma during COVID-19 – Key Findings:

- People with asthma were very anxious about COVID-19 and their level of vulnerability as a person with asthma.
- Nearly half of people with asthma (44%) reported experiencing new or increased symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- More than half of people with asthma reported they were self-isolating (67%).
- One quarter of people with asthma (26%) had faced challenges accessing their usual asthma medication.
- People with asthma experienced changes to their usual healthcare during COVID-19.

(The survey ran from 9 to 30 of April and had 1,805 respondents.)

### Pulse Surveys – key findings:

- The general level of anxiety about COVID-19 is declining.
- Despite anxiety levels declining, people with asthma are still concerned that they are vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Fewer people are identifying as self-isolating.
- The percentage of people reporting challenges accessing their asthma medication has declined.

(Approximately 300-500 people each week completed a pulse survey.)

## OVERVIEW OF ASTHMA AUSTRALIA'S RECOMMENDATIONS

In Asthma Australia's submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to COVID-19, we made an **overarching recommendation to establish a National Steering Committee to review existing pandemic plans, investigate areas for improvement, and build on the existing plans to create a comprehensive National Pandemic Preparedness Plan**. We suggested this should take place once Australia is well established in the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also focused on four key areas for improvement that would benefit people with asthma:

### 1. Research into the epidemiology of COVID-19 and asthma

We recommend funding for research into the epidemiology of COVID-19 and chronic respiratory illnesses including asthma.

### 2. Access to medical care

We recommend the proposed National Steering Committee investigate the impact of the COVID-19 response on continuity of care for patients of respiratory specialists and include continuity of care in the proposed National Pandemic Preparedness Plan.

We also recommend funding for telehealth, which is due to expire in September, become permanent to expand options for continuity of care for people with asthma, with evaluation of services occurring alongside implementation to assure quality of care and outcomes.

### 3. Access to medications

We recommend the proposed National Steering Committee establish a working group to investigate issues relating to medication supply during the COVID-19 pandemic, including representatives from respiratory consumer health groups, pharmaceutical companies, wholesalers, retail banner groups and peak bodies. We also recommend the proposed National Pandemic Preparedness Plan address potential medication shortages.

### 4. The mental health impact of COVID-19 on people with asthma

We recommend the proposed National Steering Committee investigate mental health needs, including of people with chronic respiratory illness, and address these needs in the proposed National Pandemic Preparedness Plan.

We recommend funding for telehealth for mental health services become permanent to expand options for people with asthma.

Finally, we recommend resources and tools be developed for mainstream health providers and multidisciplinary teams to assess and support mental health needs at the point of interaction, as well as appropriate training to support skill development in this area.

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<sup>i</sup> Calls to Asthma Australia doubled in March 2020 compared with the previous month – even higher than call volumes during the Black Summer bushfires. Engagement levels across digital channels were up to 3-5 times higher in March. Asthma educators said calls during COVID-19 were longer and much more complex with a greater need for information and anxiety support.