



**ST VINCENT'S
HOSPITAL**
SYDNEY

A FACILITY OF ST VINCENT'S HEALTH AUSTRALIA

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19 January 2022

Mr Gerard Hayes
Secretary
HSU NSW Branch
Level 2/109 Pitt street
Sydney NSW 2000

By email only: gerard.hayes@hsu.asn.au; josh.howarth@hsu.asn.au

Dear Mr Hayes,

Changes to Return to Work process for COVID positive employees

I write to you for the purpose of advising the Health Services Union that St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney (**SVHS**) proposes to implement a prompt return to work from as early as Day 7 post-positive Covid-19 test, rather than Day 10 as is currently the case of COVID-19-positive Health Care Workers (**HCWs**).

Background

On 1 January 2021 the NSW Government enacted a revised self-isolation guideline for all residents of NSW. The revised guideline for those residents that tested Covid-19-positive via a PCR or Rapid Antigen Test (**RAT**) are that they self-isolate for 7 days from the date of the positive test. If they have no symptoms at Day 7 they are able to leave self-isolation.

Residents that work or visit high risk settings, including hospitals and correctional facilities, are required to avoid those high risk settings for a further 3 days after they leave isolation. Staff are advised to speak with their employer prior to returning.

As a result of the current COVID-19 outbreak, a significant number of SVHS staff have been furloughed because they have contracted COVID-19 or because they have been identified as a close contact to a positive case. This has had a significant impact on staffing within the hospital and SVHS' ability to provide care to our community.

Workforce shortages are currently being addressed by innovative strategies including; partnerships with private hospitals, use of agency staff and staff voluntarily returning from leave early.

Proposed COVID-19 positive Return to Work

SVHS has considered how we can safely continue to provide essential health services to the community. In the context of the current widespread community transmission of COVID-19 the safety of staff and our community is paramount to ensuring we can manage through this period.

SVHS is proposing to implement a return to work of COVID-19-positive HCWs, who voluntarily consent to return from as early as Day 7 post-positive test.

The following plan has been designed to manage the related risks:

COVID-19-positive HCWs whose work is essential to service delivery can return to work from as early as Day 7 with a Return to Work Risk Management Plan in place for a further 3 days which includes the following:

- HCWs are asymptomatic (confirmed by the daily health care facility attestation process) and not immuno-suppressed;
- HCWs have voluntarily consented to an early return to work risk management plan developed and agreed with their manager;
- HCWs have negative RAT on 2 consecutive days, with the earliest taken on Day 6 if symptom-free (i.e. the first test is undertaken on Day 6 and Day 7 but if positive, that timeline will shift to Day 7/Day 8 etc.)
- HCWs are unable to return to work in high-risk immuno-suppressed environments (e.g. Haematology, Oncology, Aged Care, Renal Wards, Dialysis, post-transplant areas etc., and as determined by their manager)
- HCWs wear a fit-tested and checked P2 / N95 mask in all indoor areas in addition to other required PPE, in alignment with current Clinical Excellence Committee (CEC) guidelines
- HCWs are unable to use shared staff areas (e.g. meeting rooms, tea rooms). They must take their meal breaks in an appropriate and safe location outside and away from other workers (as agreed with their manager), and they must wear a fit-tested and checked P2 / N95 mask in bathrooms at all times.
- HCWs pay particular attention to hand hygiene

Note that for one (1) month following release from isolation, recovered HCWs:

- Should not undergo surveillance testing for COVID-19 with either RAT or PCR.
- Generally will not need to self-isolate or get tested if re-exposed to COVID-19 in the community or at work, unless they are symptomatic.

WHS Consultation

On 12 January 2021 the WHS Committee Members & Representatives were provided with information on this proposal and were requested to provide feedback from the areas they represent regarding the proposed early Return to Work of Covid-19-positive HCWs. In addition to positive feedback on the proposal, the key feedback included the use and availability of RATs and the use of Tea Rooms.

These matters can be addressed as follows:

- The use of RATs has been recommended by the Clinical Reference Group as better aligned with the infectious period of Covid-19. Whilst PCR Testing has greater sensitivity to Covid-19, it also detects Covid-19 following the infectious period and when a person is able to de-isolate;
- RATs availability is likely to increase with the Federal Government intervention and supply channels flowing from week commencing 17 January 2021. Where RATs are not available then alternative means of testing (e.g. saliva PCRs) will be used; and,
- The use of Tea Rooms will be addressed in the Risk Management Plan developed by managers with their staff. Staff members must take their meal breaks in an appropriate and safe location outside and away from colleagues (as agreed with their manager). Outdoor areas are advised as a preference, however alternatives during periods of inclement weather or overnight shifts need to be identified through local procedures.

Ongoing consultation

Broader communication with staff will occur on Friday 21, 2022 and SVHS will ensure to keep the Health Services Union informed on any further developments or advice from Ministry of Health (MoH).

Should you receive any queries, or have feedback you would like considered, please contact Michael Romano, People & Culture Business Partner: 0409 662 908; michael.romano@svha.org.au

Yours sincerely



Rio Pun
Senior People & Culture Business Partner
St Vincent's Hospital Sydney