# Facilitating access to care in a COVID-19 environment

December 2021

## Guidance for health practitioners

This document has been prepared by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and the National Boards in response to requests for guidance to assist health practitioners facilitate people's access to care in the current COVID-19 environment. The guidance reinforces existing codes and guidelines and other publicly available information and does not introduce new or different requirements for practitioners.

Ahpra and the National Boards recognise that registered health practitioners have led the remarkable public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia and commend them for their sustained efforts.

### Access to care

National Boards expect all health practitioners to facilitate access to care regardless of someone's vaccination status. People cannot be denied care if steps can be taken to keep the person, health practitioners and their staff safe.

Good practice involves keeping health practitioners, staff and all patients safe when caring for people. Some practitioners may be considering how best to do this while also facilitating access to care in the current COVID-19 environment. In meeting their public health obligations, health practitioners have a responsibility to promote the health of the community through evidence informed health education. Health practitioners play a critical role in helping the community understand the benefits of being vaccinated and many resources recommend that people talk to their health practitioner about the benefits of being vaccinated.

www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/indigenous#its-your-choice

www.healthdirect.gov.au/blog/7-reasons-people-dont-get-covid-19-vaccinations

In addition, the Ahpra and National Boards' position statement on *Registered health practitioners and students and COVID-19 vaccination*, and other statements relating to COVID-19 vaccination can be found on the Ahpra Vaccination information page.

### How can you facilitate people's access to care while keeping yourself, your staff and all patients safe?

Practitioners must firstly comply with public health orders in their state or territory.

The principle of safely facilitating access to care should then guide decisions about treating people in a COVID-19 environment.

The National Boards' codes of conduct (or equivalent) set out principles for good practice, including making decisions about access to care. The National Boards' codes of conduct can be found on the respective National Board websites.

The codes of conduct state that good practice involves keeping health practitioners and their staff safe when caring for people. While action should be taken to protect health practitioners and their staff if a person poses a risk to health and safety, the person should not be denied care if steps can be taken to keep health practitioners, other people and their staff safe.

**Examples of how some practice settings, such as private practice, could safely facilitate access in this current COVID-19 environment**

Noting some of these scenarios would not work in all practice settings, non-vaccinated people could be:

- seen in a dedicated room or outside the physical practice

- required to wear a mask (if not medically exempt)

- seen at dedicated times only, or wait in a safe area outside until called in for their appointment

- asked to advise if they have had a recent negative COVID-19 test result prior to attending

- seen virtually/via telehealth, if appropriate, or

- referred to another health practitioner if safe access cannot be facilitated.

### Other resources

In addition to guidance provided by National Boards' codes of conduct (or equivalent), the following may also be useful sources of information. Health practitioners should keep themselves up to date by checking information sources regularly.

- Some insurance providers have issued advice. The below links are two examples only and health practitioners are encouraged to contact their own provider.

  − www.miga.com.au/coronavirus#protecting-yourself

  − www.avant.org.au/covid-19/vaccination-faqs/.

- Professional associations.

- COVID-19 Resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Professionals

- Independent legal advice.

- Public health orders in your state and territory – information about public health orders relating to mandatory vaccination requirements should be obtained from the Commonwealth or relevant state or territory governments. If public health orders are made, you must follow them.

- Infection control guidelines in your state or territory.

- Workplace health and safety (WHS) laws. Please refer to Safe Work Australia to ensure you understand WHS laws in your jurisdiction.

- Other frameworks to support safe decision making, such as:

  − Work permissions and restrictions framework for workers in health care settings (Australian Government Department of Health)

  − www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/work-permissions-and-restrictions-framework-for-workers-in-health-care-settings

  − COVID-19 infection prevention and control risk management – Guidance (ACSQHC recently revised)

  − www.safetyandquality.gov.au/publications-and-resources/resource-library/covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-risk-management-guidance.