

The Medical Journal of Australia • MJA

MEDIA RELEASE

HEALTHCARE WORKERS WITH COVID-19: MOST CONTRACT IT AWAY FROM WORK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COVID-19 is very uncommon in Australian healthcare workers at present, and the large majority of those who have contracted COVID-19 have done so away from work, according to the authors of an article published today by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

“Four weeks ago, a clinic was established to screen staff from Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH) and neighbouring hospitals who had developed a fever or new respiratory symptoms,” wrote the authors, led by Dr Stephen Muhi, an infectious diseases physician.

“A targeted history was taken and a swab was performed according to public health department recommendations at the time. In addition to this, a public screening clinic run by the hospital was also available for HCWs practising in the broader community, so HCWs in other non-hospital settings were identified and tested.

“In the past 4 weeks, 1160 symptomatic staff have been assessed in the staff clinic and the majority were swabbed for COVID-19, while a number of HCWs have also attended the public clinic.

“Across both the staff and public screening clinics, 11 HCWs were found to be positive for COVID-19. Of the 11, eight had a history of travel or close contact with a COVID-19 case in the community. With the other three HCWs, there was no obvious COVID-19 contact in the workplace, during a period when fewer than 10 patients with COVID-19 were treated at RMH. Two of the staff, while identifying as HCWs, did not work in a clinical hospital setting and were judged to be at low risk of contracting infection from an unwell patient in their workplace. The other worked in a hospital ward where no known COVID-19 infected patients had been managed.”

While acknowledging that a dedicated service for screening and supporting staff may not be feasible in all settings, Muhi and colleagues wrote that “it does provide access to rapid testing which gives valuable reassurance for staff”.

“Importantly, monitoring the data helps to contextualise our local experience.

“Our data show that currently, community acquisition of COVID-19 is likely to be occurring in HCWs more often than work-related acquisition.

“HCW should focus on taking measures (e.g. social distancing and hand hygiene) to protect themselves from COVID-19 when away from work. Ongoing monitoring of the epidemiology related to staff clinic presentations may help provide information on local risks,” Muhi and colleagues concluded.

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