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Paul Ramsay Foundation, Minderoo Foundation and the John and Myriam Wylie Foundation

Lung Foundation Australia (LFA) is pleased to provide a submission to the independent review of Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. LFA provide essential support to Australian's experiencing a lung disease and thus, a unique perspective of the impact of COVID-19. LFA developed an extensive national COVID survey to gain an understanding of ongoing COVID symptoms, healthcare access, mental health, information and resources and the government response. The survey received 2200 responses throughout July 2022, providing integral insights which will be discussed.

About Lung Foundation

Lung Foundation Australia (LFA) is the only national charity and leading peak-body dedicated to supporting anyone with a lung disease including lung cancer. For over 31 years we have been the trusted national point-of-call for patients, their families, carers, health professionals and the general community on lung health. There are over 30 different types of lung disease currently impacting 1 in 3 Australians. Our mission is to improve lung health and reduce the impact of lung disease for all Australians. We will continue working to ensure lung health is a priority for all, from promoting lung health and early diagnosis, advocating for policy change and research investment, raising awareness about the symptoms and prevalence of lung disease and championing equitable access to treatment and care. As a patient representative charity, we have partnered with patients, health professionals, researchers, medical organisations and the Australian community to drive reform in the delivery of health services in Australia to benefit more than 7 million Australians impacted by lung disease and lung cancer.

What impact did the pandemic have on you and your community?

As of 27 July 2022, two and a half years into the pandemic, Australia reached over 11,000 COVID-19 deaths and over 9 million cases¹. These milestones represent the continuing impact from COVID-19 and the need for on-going action from the government to protect at risk Australians. LFA support and represent a diverse community of individuals diagnosed with a lung disease and due to their pre-existing health condition are vulnerable to severe illness. The emergence of a new respiratory virus understandably caused significant concern for the lung disease community and in response LFA created a dedicated resource hub which experienced:

- a 62% increase in website traffic during the peak of the pandemic
- over 134,000 visits to our digital COVID resources and information
- increase in calls and requests for information on COVID-19 and their disease
- surge in reports of distress among both patients and carers.

Lung Disease Community

Through Lung Foundation Australia's recent survey we would that nearly half of respondents had a lung disease or lung cancer. When comparing the feedback from Australians with a lung disease/lung cancer compared to those with other chronic diseases it was observed that people with a lung disease required higher levels of treatment in hospitals and under general practitioner guidance, and were more likely to have ongoing COVID-19 symptoms.

We also heard feedback from our consumers that accessing appointments with their lung condition was made more complicated due to the nature of their symptoms which is something that we would encourage further consideration and pathways for both as we move into the endemic phase and for future pandemics. On the other hand, the combination of working from home and awareness of the spread of viruses provided protection for individuals experiencing a lung disease from common respiratory viruses. The current environment, however, has caused increased challenges and concern as respiratory disease transmission is high, and restrictions are non-existent.

Deaths from respiratory diseases were considerably lower in 2020 likely due to the measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, restrictions and lockdowns caused significant impact to the mental health and wellbeing of Australians with 25 million MBS-subsidised mental health-related services processed³.

Healthcare:

Living with a lung disease throughout the pandemic exposed new challenges with almost 50% of individuals with a pre-existing lung disease experiencing a cancellation or delay of an appointment, test, or procedure which then had further negative impacts for many. These findings support the 'My Health Can't Wait NSW' survey results from Johnson and Johnson which found 48% of people surveyed from NSW delayed a medical appointment due to COVID with 32% reporting worse mental health subsequently⁴.

Carers

LFA also provide support and services for carers of individuals with a lung disease and highlight the need to ensure tailored information and support is available for carers throughout COVID. We heard from a number of carers in our survey, many of whom cared for a partner or parent.

- Only 33% of people being cared for were able to receive the same level of care and support for their existing condition compared to before the pandemic. This caused worsened mental health for 25% and worsened condition or symptoms for 13%.
- When asked about the potential impact on their health and ability to care for others and impact on their life more broadly, almost 1 in 2 carers are extremely or very anxious about future COVID-19 infections and Long COVID.
- 1 in 3 carers said treatment options would assist in caring for someone with on-going COVID symptoms.

Mental Health

It is widely understood that the pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health of many Australians. Lung Foundation Australia want to acknowledge the additional impact that COVID-19 had on the mental health of those living with a lung disease or lung cancer, as well as their carers. Over 50% of people with a lung disease are extremely or very anxious about future COVID-19 infections and Long COVID compared to 41% for other chronic disease and 30% for no chronic disease. Despite the negative burden for these Australians, through our survey we heard that 4 in 5 people are now more aware/concerned about their lung health and the importance of breathing well, which is really positive as a population level.

What worked well, and what didn't work well, in governments' policy responses to reduce the impact of the pandemic on you and your community?

Resources provided by the Department of Health (state or federal) are highly regarded as the preferred source when seeking further information regarding on-going symptoms, followed closely by medical practitioners. This correlates with the level of trust indicated with medical professionals, international agencies, and the federal and state governments considered the most trusted sources.

What should be done now to better prepare for the next health crisis?

The momentum from the COVID pandemic should be channelled to improve the current health system and strengthen healthcare access. Telehealth services must be strengthened; addressing health literacy gaps and providing support for anyone who cannot easily access or use this technology. Vulnerable population groups such as those with a lung disease, deserve designated support and as the leading lung health body, LFA are well positioned to provide information, support and throughout the current COVID pandemic, particularly as it is a respiratory illness. However, for all Australians it is integral health messaging is consistent across the nation.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of the benefit of vaccinations, and building upon the increased awareness the government must utilise this time to increase vaccination rates within at-risk communities. Rolling out free vaccination programs such as the influenza and pneumococcal vaccine for vulnerable populations, such as those with a lung disease, will protect at risk groups from severe disease, reduce the burden on hospitals and prevent deaths. In the face of the on-going pandemic, individuals with a lung disease must be provided with early access to vaccines and antivirals, as a vulnerable population to COVID-19. Currently, while considered at risk, individuals with COPD, severe asthma, interstitial and fibrotic lung disease are not funded for pneumococcal vaccination under the National Immunisation Program⁵.

What other issues would you like to raise with the Panel?

Evidence suggests Long COVID will impact 1 in 5 people, posing a significant burden on many Australians and our healthcare system⁶. A national YouGov survey completed by LFA in 2022 indicated 78% of the community are worried about long COVID and whilst Long COVID clinics are being developed, more needs to be done to support and care for individuals who suffer from ongoing symptoms particularly for individuals with a lung disease.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback. If you would like to discuss further, please contact Paige Preston, Senior Manager of Policy and Advocacy at Lung Foundation Australia on PaigeP@lungfoundation.com.au.

Lung Foundation Australia

References:

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