



COVID-19 response framework for Aboriginal communities NSW North Coast

Version 2.0 August 2021

Healthy North Coast acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands across our region and pays respect to the Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise these lands were never ceded and acknowledge the continuation of culture and connection to land, sky and sea. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First Peoples and honour the rich diversity of the world's oldest living culture.

1. Introduction

Aboriginal people experience higher rates of chronic disease and complex health issues than the non-Aboriginal population. This places Aboriginal people at greater risk of serious illness associated with COVID-19. Approximately 80% of the mortality gap for people aged 35 to 74 years is due to chronic diseases, measured in terms of potential years of life lost. The most common health issues in Aboriginal communities are heart diseases, diabetes, liver diseases, chronic lower respiratory disease, cerebrovascular diseases, and cancer (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010).

Due to the risk COVID-19 poses for Aboriginal communities across the North Coast, Healthy North Coast has developed a coordinated approach to reduce the impact of COVID-19 within Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal people have extensive kinship systems, cultural obligations and close living situations that will increase the risk of transmission of COVID-19 within Aboriginal families and communities. Aboriginal people can be highly mobile between communities, which can inadvertently put other people, families and communities at risk of contracting COVID-19.

1.1 Purpose

Increase preparedness and awareness around COVID-19 in Aboriginal communities on the NSW North Coast. This framework aims to ensure Aboriginal communities on the North Coast have access to culturally safe education and resources to enable preparedness and awareness around COVID-19; and to respond effectively and in a timely way when an Aboriginal person tests positive with COVID-19.

1.2. Objectives

1. Provide Aboriginal people who test positive to COVID-19 within the Healthy North Coast footprint with options to effectively isolate.
2. Provide culturally safe, person-centred care for Aboriginal people, their families and community when diagnosed with COVID-19.
3. Ensure culturally safe, equitable and accessible COVID-19 service provision.
4. Provide culturally safe education, resources and support with a localised approach to the Aboriginal community on COVID-19.
5. Support Aboriginal people and their families affected by COVID-19 with isolation, including by providing resources and information based on needs.
6. Provide support for Aboriginal people to remain in community and have access to telehealth services.
7. Work collaboratively with clear communication, coordination and planning between Healthy North Coast, Aboriginal medical services (AMSs) and NSW Health (MNCLHD and NNSWLHD) on COVID-19 response for Aboriginal communities across the North Coast.

The Public Health Unit is referred to as LHD. This includes both LHDs that operate across the Healthy North Coast region, MNCLHD and NNSWLHD.

2. Rationale

Aboriginal people experience higher rates of chronic disease and complex health issues, which places them at greater risk of serious illness associated with COVID-19 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010).

Aboriginal people are at a higher risk of transmission and severity of COVID-19 because they are highly mobile and frequently travel to see family and participate in cultural events. There is often limited access and availability to health services, with limited transport options. Due to a lack of equitable access and intergenerational mistrust of mainstream health services, unwell people may present later to be assessed.

Aboriginal people experience greater instances of overcrowded conditions or intergenerational living within the home that may make it difficult to self-isolate if someone is suspected to have or is diagnosed with COVID-19 (*Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) CDNA National Guidelines for Public Health Units*). It is essential to support Aboriginal people who test positive to COVID-19 with options to isolate, as there may be family members living in the home with a chronic disease and isolating in the home may not be an option. It is also important that if the person/family chooses to stay and isolate in the home that there is culturally safe support provided to the person/family during the isolation period.

This framework has been developed based on the principles and understanding of cultural safety, Aboriginal kinship systems and cultural obligations, and the geographical locations and close living situations of Aboriginal people and communities. There has been extensive consultation and input from Aboriginal stakeholders including Aboriginal medical services, local Aboriginal land councils, Aboriginal staff from LHDs and staff from the Healthy North Coast Aboriginal Health Team.

In 2020, Healthy North Coast worked closely with Telstra to develop a plan to improve the network connectivity within remote/rural Aboriginal communities within the footprint that have been identified as having minimal or no network connectivity (Objective 8). Permanent solutions will be implemented in the identified communities to remedy these connectivity issues. These communities will then be provided with IT equipment by Healthy North Coast to enable access to telehealth services while remaining in community. This process is being undertaken in consultation with Aboriginal community controlled health services including AMSs and land councils.

There has been a collaborative approach across the health sector and the Aboriginal community controlled sector to ensure consistent, culturally safe provision of education and resources are being delivered to community.

There will be a clear process to support Aboriginal people across the NSW North Coast who test positive with COVID-19 with temporary accommodation to effectively isolate. This will include clear understanding on what supports the different organisations can provide during the period an Aboriginal person is impacted by COVID-19.

The Healthy North Coast Aboriginal Health Team has developed and will continue to develop culturally safe COVID-19 resources to disseminate to Aboriginal communities across the North Coast footprint.

There will be regular communication between Healthy North Coast, LHDs and AMS/GP to ensure a coordinated, collaborative and planned approach in response to COVID-19 for Aboriginal communities across the North Coast.

3. Healthy North Coast COVID-19 procedure for Aboriginal communities across the North Coast

The COVID-19 response for Aboriginal communities on the North Coast procedure will provide guidance if an Aboriginal person tests positive to COVID-19 to effectively implement the procedure in a timely manner to reduce the further spread within the family and community.

The eligibility for activation of the response procedure is an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person or a non-Aboriginal person who is normally part of the household of an Aboriginal person, who resides within the Healthy North Coast footprint and has a positive COVID-19 test.

To ensure Aboriginal people in isolation can remain as safe and as well as possible, Healthy North Coast/LHD will:

- Ensure that individual and family basic needs are met, e.g. food, personal hygiene and cleaning supplies. This support is provided where individuals/families have no other means to meet their basic needs.
- Support the social and emotional wellbeing of those in isolation through resources on wellbeing during isolation, and further support and activities for adults and children to do during isolation.
- Educate people on how to reduce the risk of transmission to others in the home and the community.

There are options available to the individuals/family to support the isolation process and reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to others in the family and community.

The options include:

a) Remaining in the current residence to isolate.

For those who prefer to isolate in their home, support will be provided to inform people on how to reduce the risk of further transmission of COVID-19 to others residing in the home and those in the community. This education will be delivered collaboratively between Healthy North Coast and the LHD through verbal and written resources. There will be a printable COVID-19 isolation resource kit provided to the individual/family that will provide a range of information on keeping safe and well during the isolation period.

b) Isolating at an alternative location/residence within the community.

To keep people within their local communities and close to family, the community may wish to nominate a residence or residences as isolation venues, temporarily moving out those who are not infected. This option would require careful consideration to ensure no additional exposures during relocation of those infected, but is a feasible alternative to temporary accommodation off Country.

c) Isolating in temporary accommodation where available.

If isolation at home or in an alternative residence in the community is not possible, there may be an option of temporary accommodation. This accommodation will be provided by the LHDs. Accommodation may be limited to specific locations as advised by the LHD. Transport to the accommodation will need to be independently managed by the individual/family. However, if there are financial barriers with regards to fuel, a prepaid fuel voucher can be provided.

Notification of a positive result will occur via the following processes:

Confirmed case of COVID-19 in an Aboriginal person or person residing in a household with other Aboriginal people on the NSW North Coast needs to be communicated to the AMS or GP responsible by the Public Health Unit as soon as a result is available. This notification of a positive case of COVID-19 will trigger the COVID-19 response for Aboriginal Communities on the North Coast procedure of a culturally safe communication plan between the services and the patient and their family. Healthy North Coast's Aboriginal Health Team will then liaise with the LHD to confirm which isolation method is being utilised.

1. Individual/family provided with required COVID-19 resource packs.
2. Prepaid fuel voucher provided to individual/family if required.
3. Healthy North Coast will provide basic essential supplies for the first 24 hours where a positive COVID-19 test is received. Support is only provided where individuals/families have no other means to meet their basic needs. Each request is assessed by Healthy North Coast on a case-by-case basis. Ongoing support with provision of food, medicine and care packages to be provided

by family or other services in conjunction with LHD recommendations. Support will not be provided to those residing in the Special Health Accommodation provided by the MNCLHD.

4. Healthy North Coast will provide advice regarding food/care packages for family members in isolation at home if required. Support for return to community after being cleared by health authorities.
5. Debrief with organisations regarding management of the patient and pathway to identify any gaps and update procedure if required. Video/audio meeting with stakeholders to discuss the experience and agree on any changes required.

3.1 Roles and responsibilities

Mid North Coast and Northern NSW Local Health Districts (LHDs)

- Testing, screening and diagnosis of COVID-19 positive patients
- Notification to AMS or GP
- Notification to Healthy North Coast to trigger the action plan of the framework when a diagnosis is made
- Notification to AMS or GP and Healthy North Coast to activate the [Management of Adults with Mild COVID-19 illness GP Response Framework](#) where clinically appropriate to facilitate virtual care
- Coordination and funding of accommodation
- Support and advice regarding cleaning of residence/accommodation

Healthy North Coast

- Provide support to LHDs as required
- Provide financial support and resources for AMS/GPs to provide virtual care where clinically appropriate, as per the [Management of Adults with Mild COVID-19 illness GP Response Framework](#)
- Development, collation and distribution of isolation resources kits and material resource packs
- Advocacy around identified barriers for Aboriginal communities impacted by COVID-19
- Coordination of essential items where not otherwise available

AMS/GP

- Care coordination for telehealth, GP, social work, prescriptions, etc.

4. Procedures and policies

Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/management-plan-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-populations.pdf>

Infection Prevention and Control Novel Coronavirus 2019 (2019-nCoV) – Primary and Community Care

http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/567988/Infection-Control-Primary-and-Community-Care-2019-nCoV.pdf

5. Limitations/risks identified

Limitations and risks identified that may impact on successful activation of this framework include but are not limited to:

- Lack of notification via LHD/Public Health Unit of positive COVID-19 case within community – failure to mobilise response procedure
- Unavailability of accommodation
- Number of positive cases too large for the number of accommodation available
- Funding exhausted
- Community transfer of COVID-19 at a rate that isolation outside of community is no longer viable

6. Support

This framework will be supported financially and in kind by Healthy North Coast, the Many Rivers Alliance and the LHDs.

7. Reporting

1. Reporting on expenditure
2. Reporting on outputs:
 - Number of notifications received from Public Health Unit
 - Occasions of access to telehealth within Aboriginal communities
 - Number of Aboriginal identified cases supported by the framework
 - Number of persons provided with accommodation
 - Number of care coordination occasions
 - Number of COVID-19 resource packs provided
 - Delivery of culturally safe, localised education

8. Privacy and confidentiality

Healthy North Coast respects and upholds the right to privacy protection under the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) (“Privacy Act”), the Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000, Privacy Amendment (Enhance Privacy Protection) Act 2012, the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs), and the Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002 (NSW) (*Appendix 2*).

9. Appendices

Appendix 1: COVID-19 Notification Contact List

In the event of a positive case of COVID-19 in an Aboriginal person within the Healthy North Coast footprint, please phone the relevant numbers in your region to activate the response framework.

LHD/AMS/GP to contact Healthy North Coast Aboriginal Health Team member who will ensure support is provided to patients as required.

Noell Burgess 0419 281 068 (Tweed–Ballina region)
Djaan Jarrett 0431 212 009 (Lismore–Grafton–Casino region)
Keara Pearce 0437 031 743 (Nambucca–Coffs Harbour region)
Jessica Morris 0439 568 072 (Port Macquarie–Kempsey region)

After hours/weekends:

Public Health Unit – Local Health District

Please note: AMS contacts are available to clinicians on the HealthPathways website.

Appendix 2: [COVID-19 Response Framework Flowchart](#)

- [Appendix 3: Response Framework for Aboriginal people with positive diagnosis of COVID-19 on the NSW North Coast – GP Information](#)
- [Appendix 4: HNC COVID-19 Privacy and Confidentiality Procedure for Aboriginal people](#)
- [Appendix 5: Isolating at home](#)
- [Appendix 6: Useful contacts for people in isolation](#)
- [Appendix 7: How to use Zoom instructions](#)

10. References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010. *Contribution of chronic disease to the gap in adult mortality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians*. Cat. No. IHW 48. Canberra: AIHW.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) CDNA National Guidelines for Public Health Units.
[https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/7A8654A8CB144F5FCA2584F8001F91E2/\\$File/interim-COVID-19-SoNG-v2.4.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/7A8654A8CB144F5FCA2584F8001F91E2/$File/interim-COVID-19-SoNG-v2.4.pdf)

Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance: National Arrangements.
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NSW Health 2020. *Guidance for managers and staff at hotels and other accommodation facilities hosting people in COVID-19 quarantine isolation*.
<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/covid-19-hotels-and-accommodation-facilities.aspx>

Department of Health 2020. *Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for hotels and hotel staff*.
https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-hotels-and-hotel-staff-coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-hotels-and-hotel-staff_2.pdf