

Joint statement on the need for free and accessible rapid antigen tests to protect public health and the economic recovery

As Australia faces the reality of Omicron ripping through our communities with devastating consequences for both public health and the economy, we need the Federal Government to provide free and accessible rapid antigen tests (RATs) for the entire community.

Rapid Antigen Tests are an essential tool in managing this pandemic and stopping the spread of the virus, allowing us to keep COVID-19 out of homes, workplaces and public venues. The United States and United Kingdom governments are providing free RATs, enabling people to test and get the results without delay to keep workplaces and the community as safe as possible.

Meanwhile, the situation in Australia stands in stark contrast. The move to largescale RAT testing has been beset with problems including reliance on market forces to ration inadequate supply, slow delivery, the PCR testing system collapsing under the weight of overwhelming demand, and price gouging from elements of the retail distribution network.

A public health crisis requires a public policy response. The current distribution model centred on private retail sales to individuals and businesses is not fit for purpose. It leaves too many behind and too often the financial means of people will determine whether they have adequate access to RATs. This leaves the whole community vulnerable. People at risk are hiding at home, unable to know who is safe; workers are expected to put themselves in harm's way without access to tests; concession card holders struggle to access the limited number of RATs notionally allocated to them; NDIS participants have been told to use their NDIS allowance to buy RATs commercially; low-income families fear for their children, unable to give them the same protections as those from wealthy backgrounds.

This pandemic has shown us that none of us will be safe until everyone is safe. Free and accessible RATs for all are needed to limit the spread and keep the whole community safe – not just those who can afford to pay.

The Australian Government must act urgently to provide free and accessible RATs to keep our community safe from this virus.

