

Media release

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Hospital Pharmacists' COVID-19 call: Wider antiviral eligibility and fourth vaccines to protect workforce

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) has today called for both wider access to oral COVID-19 antivirals to combat rising COVID-19 hospitalisations amid a constrained hospital workforce, and an additional vaccine booster for healthcare workers for their protection.

SHPA Chief Executive Kristin Michaels says the Omicron winter wave is putting additional strain and stress on a hospitals system and healthcare workforce that is already over capacity.

'In the past month, COVID-19 hospitalisations have increased by 30% – it's past time for Australia to be jolted from complacency.

'It is incredibly disappointing to hear that just over 50,000 doses of oral COVID-19 antivirals have been dispensed to patients with COVID-19, despite 1.3 million doses in national supplies.

'Hospital Pharmacists understand oral COVID-19 antivirals intimately – being the first to supply these medicines at the start of 2022 before they were subsidised by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) – and SHPA supports the expansion of PBS eligibility criteria to align with [National COVID-19 Evidence Taskforce Guidelines](#), to reduce COVID-19 related hospitalisations as much as possible.'

Ms Michaels says current criteria misalignment is delaying treatment when hospital workers have no time to spare.

'Currently, there is a higher risk threshold to access PBS-subsidised oral COVID-19 antivirals, while the [National COVID-19 Evidence Taskforce Guidelines](#) recommend treatment for some patients if just one of the identified risk factors is present.

'This variance adds onerous administration for our doctors and Hospital Pharmacists, who must make informed decisions between treatment with oral COVID-19 antivirals that are PBS-subsidised or from the National Medical Stockpile, while in a pressure-cooker environment.

'Expansion and alignment of eligibility criteria is needed now, and SHPA also supports our primary care colleagues to facilitate greater access to these antivirals, as Hospital Pharmacists continue to see patients readmitted to hospital with COVID-19 after they have been unable to source these medicines closer to home.'

Ms Michaels says SHPA calls for an additional vaccine booster to be made available to healthcare workers, echoing calls from various government, medical and pharmacy stakeholders.

'Hospital and healthcare workers were the first cohort of Australians to receive their COVID-19 vaccines, and the first to be eligible for boosters at the end of 2021.

'We welcome today's news that a fourth shot will be made available to Australians over 30 years of age. This will go a long way to further protecting our precious healthcare workforce and ensure hospitals can remain staffed.'

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About SHPA

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) is the national, professional organisation for the 6,100+ Hospital Pharmacists, and their Hospital Pharmacist Intern and Hospital Pharmacy Technician colleagues working across Australia's health system, advocating for their pivotal role improving the safety and quality of medicines use. Embedded in multidisciplinary medical teams and equipped with exceptional medicines management expertise, SHPA members are progressive advocates for clinical excellence, committed to evidence-based practice and passionate about patient care.

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