

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

Pandemic Declaration Accountability
and Oversight Committee



Restrictions on hospital visitation under Pandemic Orders

Questionnaire

Purpose of questionnaire

The Pandemic Declaration Accountability and Oversight Committee, as part of its functions issued under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*, is conducting a review of the Pandemic (Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities) Orders (Nos. 1 to 5) and the Pandemic (Public Safety) Order.

The Committee has issued this questionnaire to all Victorian hospitals to understand how the Orders has been implemented and to identify any issues hospitals have experienced related to the Orders.

The Committee notes that as of 11.59 pm 22 April 2022, restrictions on hospital visitation (except for the requirement to wear masks) were revoked. However, the Committee still wishes to understand the experience your organisation has had with the Orders, including the implementation of previous orders. In particular, challenges faced in enforcing the Orders and managing exemption requests.

Please note, this information may be used and published by the Committee as part its reporting.

Response

Please provide a response to the questionnaire by **9 May 2022**.

The completed questionnaire should be sent to: pdaoc@parliament.vic.gov.au.

Questions

1. Has your organisation implemented visitor restrictions that are in excess of the restrictions detailed in the orders? If so, when did this occur and in what circumstances?

The Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities Order 2021 (No. 1) commenced at 11:59pm on 15 December 2021 revoked 11:59pm on 22 April 2022.

The Women's complied with and applied the 'Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities Orders' (Nos. 1 to 5) between the period when they commenced on 15 Dec 2021 and when they were revoked on 22 April 2022. We did this in parallel with expert clinical advice from our infectious disease experts, considering patient need, vulnerability, age, clinical condition, psychosocial and mental health and wellbeing and the safety of our healthcare workers, volunteers, other patients and visitors.

The Orders permitted hospitals to set higher conditions or restrictions if necessary. Given challenges of maintaining compliance with maximum density quotients due to the physical constraints of our hospital building, there were times during periods of high community transmission where there was insufficient space to adequately physically distance in outpatient clinics and inpatient wards. During these periods, we implemented measures that were above the orders to limit visitors and support people from attending. These measures were based on our local assessments of risks to the health, safety and wellbeing of our staff and our patients and their families, and were considered to be commensurate with the risk we were intending to mitigate.

2. Has your organisation received any complaints about visitor restrictions?

Yes

If so, what were the outcomes of these?

Visitor restrictions posed challenges for both staff and patients and their families, and at times it was difficult to find the right balance to meet the unique needs of the patient and their families. At different times, we did receive complaints from some patients and families.

In November 2021, the Women's appointed an additional staff member to the role of COVID Consumer Liaison Representative to work specifically with patients and families in resolving their COVID related issues, including issues related to our permitted visitor policy. Where patients and families experienced the restrictions as being too restrictive, particularly with regard to restricting support people from attending outpatient clinics and restricting broader family members from visiting inpatient areas, our Consumer Liaison team worked with clinical teams and each individual family to understand their needs and seek to resolve their concerns when possible.

The measures implemented were generally sufficient to resolve the immediate concerns raised and often included:

- providing additional context and specific patient and visitor information
- linking patients in with specialist clinical teams
- providing additional clinical support
- facilitating telephone, video or other means of electronic communication with the partners, carers and support persons to meet patient physical, emotional and social wellbeing (including mental health) needs
- approving exemptions to our permitted visitor policy for families experiencing exceptional

circumstances such as loss of life

3. Have there been instances where your organisation has misinterpreted the restrictions under the orders (e.g., when orders have changed or through confusing language in the content of the orders)?

No, there were no instances of misinterpretation of the 'Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities Orders' at the Women's.

4. How many applications for visiting exemptions has your organisation received and how many been approved?

The Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities Order 2021 (No. 1) commenced at 11:59pm on 15 December 2021 revoked 11:59pm on 22 April 2022 – during this period we received 1,072 applications for visiting exemptions. We approved 1,036 of these applications for visiting exemptions.

5. What staff member of your organisation has assessed applications for exemptions?

Applications for visitor exemptions were assessed by an officer at Director or Executive Director level during *business hours* or an appropriate delegate. Applications received outside of *business hours* were assessed by the Executive on Call or an appropriate delegate.

6. What steps were taken to inform all visitors and their relatives of visiting rules and capacity to apply for an exemption?

Throughout the pandemic we consistently communicated with families and carers, with our staff and with the community. We used multiple communications channels to ensure that timely and accurate advice about visitor restrictions was available to patients and their families. Examples included:

- The creation of a COVID Information Hub on the Women's website, which included a suite of information relating to all aspects of our COVID safe measures as well as COVID health and safety guidance for pregnant women
- Push notifications through all our social media platforms, as well as customised information in response to individual social media messages
- Entry signage
- Access to a dedicated COVID Consumer Liaison Representative
- In person contact with members of the dedicated Hospital Support Team on arrival
- Customised information in response to phone calls and face to face enquiries to our Switchboard team and other teams taking queries

7. What steps were taken to advise staff of the availability of the exemption process when dealing with the public and visitors to patients?

In addition to the Women's website and social media platforms mentioned above, we communicated directly with our staff using our COVID all-staff emails, daily Management and Executive huddles, individual clinical team huddles and the Women's COVID Staff Hub microsite.

8. What was your overall impression of the system, and could it have been improved?

The 'Visitors to Hospitals and Care Facilities Orders' allowed health services to work through individual circumstances to find a balance where the least restrictive option was achieved, whilst remaining compliant with the Orders. At the Women's, we strived to find that balance by taking an empathic and caring approach whilst working with patients and families to find the least restrictive and most suitable solution to meet their needs.

The Department of Health's plain language guidance on visitor restrictions, sent via the regular CEO Bulletins, assisted health services to interpret the Pandemic Orders and make decisions about how to apply the hospital visitor orders. Utilising these, in consultation with other health services, helped to ensure a level of consistency in practice across health services.

We are confident that we managed the pandemic orders in relation to visitors with compassion, empathy and care. There were and continue to be difficult and challenging discussions. However, we continue to seek to strike the right balance of communicating clearly and transparently and not digressing from our role of providing safe and timely care to our patients. As difficult as this has been, the Women's was supportive of the Pandemic Orders to reduce visitors to sensitive settings across Victoria, to protect the state's most vulnerable members of our community as we collectively prepared the Victorian population to be ready to live with COVID in its endemic state.