

STATEMENT ON ABC STORY – July 2024

Australian Pathology has released the following statement in response to claims made in an ABC article, and repeated by Stephen Duckett, relating to pathology testing during the pandemic.

Australian Pathology members are subject to routine compliance audits by the Department of Health. To our knowledge, there has never been any significant findings of Medicare non-compliance during the period in which the departmental compliance scheme has been in place.

If Stephen Duckett could point to negative findings from compliance audits, he would do so. But he can't, so he makes unsubstantiated claims against a sector that helps 1 million patients a week given 70 percent of all medical treatment decisions rely on pathology.

It is important to note that there were also audits undertaken during the pandemic.

For example, in 2022, the Department of Health did an audit of Medicare claims by pathology providers of COVID tests undertaken during December 2021. No instances of 'double dipping' were found by the audit investigation.

There are also multiple checks and balances in the system. For example, during the pandemic, daily test volumes were being reported by providers to state public health departments. The results of these COVID tests – every single one, positive or negative – were going out to patients via SMS. Positive tests were being reported individually by pathologists to the state public health departments as well as to individual patients. There are multiple layers of accountability - some of which are highly publicly visible - to be able to verify whether the numbers of tests being reported by providers match with the number of tests invoiced to Medicare and to state governments.

Despite the extensive systems in place and the Department of Health's compliance work, there has been no validation of claims of roting.

We also dispute the notion that a patient who presented without a referral should not have been tested. The overwhelming public health messaging from all tiers of government was to get tested if you felt you had symptoms, or felt you had been exposed, particularly given they were required to isolate until they got the test results. It would have been absurd to refer patients back to a GP, both because of the urgency involved, and the strain it would have placed on the GP system. All levels of governments did not encourage the practice.

At all times, Australian Pathology members delivered COVID-19 testing as requested by the State, Territory and Federal Governments. Australia's testing regime followed the recommendations of the World Health Organisation – to test to know where disease was, and then to isolate to stop the spread of the virus. This saved many lives, most especially early on in the pandemic prior to any vaccines.

Over the course of the pandemic, there were 73 million COVID-19 tests (April 2020-June 2022) delivered in Australia by both the state (public) health system and the private sector. We all worked together to rise to the challenge presented by the pandemic, and clearly have different reflections to those who were not directly involved at the time.

The pathology sector is proud of the role it played in delivering one of the world's best testing programs efficiently during the pandemic to help keep Australians safe and healthy.