

## Aboriginal groups fear Covid outbreaks inevitable after changes to close contact definition

*Experts warn 'wrong decision' puts Northern Territory's most vulnerable and remote communities at risk*



*A Covid clinic in Katherine, Northern Territory. Doctors fear Indigenous communities will be hit hardest by national cabinet's move to narrow the definition of a close contact.*

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Indigenous health groups have lambasted national cabinet's move to narrow the definition of a close contact as the "wrong decision", amid concern over the possibility of outbreaks in remote communities with comparatively low vaccination rates.

With some PCR testing sites overwhelmed and a widespread shortage of rapid antigen tests, the prime minister, Scott Morrison, said on Thursday leaders had agreed to a change that will see fewer people required to get tested and those who are positive released from isolation sooner.

In the Northern Territory, which announced a record 60 cases on Friday, the chief minister, Michael Gunner, said he would introduce an indoor mask mandate in response to the rising infections. There are 24 people in hospital and none in intensive care, figures released on Friday showed.

However, Gunner also said the NT would liberalise its definition of a close contact to focus on "household contacts" rather than possible exposures at other sites.

“We know New South Wales and the east coast are in a different situation to the territory, but a lot of decisions made by [national cabinet] will work for the territory and can be applied here,” he said.

John Paterson, the chief executive of the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT, told Guardian Australia the new close contact definition adopted by national cabinet was the “wrong decision”.

“We’ve got a fast-moving virus that’s spreading itself through the entire community,” he said. “It’s a matter of if not when it gets into our most vulnerable, remote, sickest population in some of those communities throughout the Northern Territory, and throughout Australia I should add.”

While vaccination rates across Australia are some of the highest in the world, Indigenous leaders fear there are still pockets where rates are lagging.

In some regions of Queensland, the fully vaccinated rate among Aboriginal people over 15 years old was still hovering between 55% and 70% on 21 December, according to Department of Health data.

Paterson also pointed to reports that the Palm Island Aboriginal shire council this week uploaded a grim image to social media of a white shipping container that it said had been received from Queensland Health.

It said it was to be used as a temporary morgue if required and was the “starkest reminder yet that locals are at serious risk of illness and death from Covid”.

“That’s frightening stuff,” Paterson said. “I’ve had people texting and sending messages that it’s (the easing of Covid guidelines) causing huge anxieties in remote communities.”

Outside Darwin, the vaccination rate in the Northern Territory among Aboriginal people over 15 years old was also about 70%.

Paterson said communities in the Barkly local government area, which includes Tennant Creek, which was recently in lockdown, and remote communities in the Alice Springs LGA were among those he was worried about.

“What’s worked for us effectively in the Northern Territory ... is we were able to identify where those close contacts were: the venues, the communities, airports, wherever,” Paterson said.

“If you were on a plane and sitting two rows from a positive case you were alerted and had to go and get tested. That was a very effective public health strategy of informing the broader community of close contacts.”

Gunner said on Friday that since the NT changed its border rules “the vast majority of transmission has been enclosed household contacts”.

“It makes sense to direct our resources into household contacts,” he said.

Gunner said people who test positive would need a negative PCR test on day six to be released from isolation. No such requirement now exists in NSW.

Gunner said unvaccinated close contacts would also be required to isolate for 14 days, rather than seven.

He also indicated that the government might consider other measures to flatten the curve, including lockdowns.

“At this stage though we think the indoor mask mandate is a proportionate response,” he said.

Vaccination levels among Indigenous Australians are well in excess of 80% in almost all regions of NSW and Victoria, which have so far been hardest hit by the virus.

But they are much lower in South Australia, where cases are rising significantly, and only between 45% and 60% in most regions of Western Australia, which plans to keep its borders shut until next year.

Dr Jason Agostino, a medical adviser to the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, said before the close contact definition was changed there had already been twice the rate of infection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a reference to figures compiled in October.

“What I’m fearing is that [Indigenous communities] will be hit hardest,” he told ABC Radio on Friday morning. “We have unacceptable levels of crowded housing and people with chronic diseases that start at a younger age, along with in particular in Queensland and South Australia, lower rates of vaccinations.

“That mix means more infections as well as more severe disease. As we get out into our rural and remote communities, the capacity to deal with severe disease is really limited.”