



8 April 2022

MEDIA RELEASE

AUSMAT departs Vanuatu after successful mission to support the Government's COVID-19 health response

In response to a request from the Government of Vanuatu, a five-person Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) deployed to Vanuatu from 23 March – 7 April to support Vanuatu's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The team included three doctors (including an infectious diseases physician and an emergency physician), an emergency nurse and a logistics specialist.



The AUSMAT personnel at Vila Central Hospital

AUSMAT spent over two weeks in Vanuatu and met with key Government of Vanuatu officials and healthcare workers leading the COVID-19 response on Efate and Santo. In a debrief with Government leaders, Deputy Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau thanked the team for their work.

“As part of the Pacific family Vanuatu is grateful for the generous support provided by the Australian Government through the Ausmat Team. I believe the skills and knowledge transferred to our local staff is invaluable. We further recognise that as families we look out for each other's needs and provide needed support where required. It is important to note that in the spirit of partnership we appreciate that together we are strong. And any further assistance from the government of Australia and its people to Vanuatu is well embraced,” said the Deputy Prime Minister.



Minister of Health Bruno Leingkone welcomed the support of the Australian medical team, who worked alongside ni-Vanuatu health professionals playing critical roles in the COVID-19 response.

Australia's High Commissioner to Vanuatu, Heidi Bootle, said Australia did not hesitate to respond to Vanuatu's request for support.

“Australia is standing shoulder to shoulder with Vanuatu during this time and I have been very pleased to see this team of Australian medics work alongside the ni-Vanuatu doctors, nurses and health professionals leading the COVID-19 response,” said High Commissioner Bootle.

AUSMAT team leader Dr James Doube said the team was honoured to travel to Vanuatu to lend a helping hand.

“We have come here to assist our neighbours as they manage this outbreak of COVID-19, and to share some of our experiences from outbreaks elsewhere to assist Vanuatu to minimise the impact of the outbreak. We have left with new knowledge and lifelong connections” said Dr. Doube.



The AUSMAT team visiting the Ex-FOL community isolation centre in Port Vila.

At Vila Central Hospital (VCH), AUSMAT worked with the hardworking nurses and doctors who have been at the frontline of Vanuatu's COVID-19 response. The team provided training, mentoring and specialist support in response to VCH's acute needs. This included support for clinical case management and education on treating COVID-19 patients in a critical condition.



AUSMAT team leader Dr. James Doube praised Vanuatu’s health workforce for their dedication and resilience, as well as the country’s success in keeping out COVID-19 for two years, making Vanuatu one of a few countries in the world not to experience some of the more severe variants of the virus.

“Vanuatu is fortunate to have a well-trained and dedicated health force who have been putting a lot of effort into getting their hospitals ready to deal with the inevitable arrival of COVID-19,” said Dr. Doube.



AUSMAT Emergency Nurse Lead Jason Phieler with Vila Central Hospital staff

On Efate, the team visited Vila Central Hospital (VCH), EXFOL stadium, Korman Stadium, Vanuatu Family Health Association Clinic, and the Mele and Saupia Health Centres.

AUSMAT also visited Northern Provincial Hospital (NPH) and Port Olry Health Centre in Santo, where they mentored NPH nurses and doctors on COVID-19 management, critical care and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).



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A clinical demonstration of proning (placing patients in respiratory distress on their stomachs in intensive care) at Northern Provincial Hospital in Santo.

The AUSMAT mission included meetings with the Ministry of Health, SHEFA Health, Vanuatu National Health Emergency Operations Centre, Health Technical Advisory Group, World Health Organisation, UNICEF, the Pacific Community (SPC) and NGOs.

Following discussions with the Government of Vanuatu, AUSMAT will produce a final report with recommendations for the Government of Vanuatu to consider. AUSMAT's assessment will also help inform Australia's future support for the Government of Vanuatu's COVID-19 response.

The team's mission concluded on 7 April, but Australia's support for Vanuatu's COVID-19 response continues. This week, an additional 50,000 Rapid Antigen Tests and 40,000 syringes arrived from Australia to support Vanuatu's testing capabilities and the national vaccination rollout.

This support is in addition to the health sector specialists deployed to Vanuatu to offer longer-term assistance for COVID-19 response, including doctors and nurses, an infection prevention and control specialist, a health security advisor and a biomedical engineer.

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