

23 November, 2020

South Eastern Sydney Local Health District contact tracers keeping the community safe from COVID-19

As the year draws to a close, the South Eastern Sydney Local Health District (SESLHD) is recognising the phenomenal efforts of its Contact Tracing Team, who have traced more than 5,000 contacts since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The team has traced contacts across South Eastern Sydney, an area which covers the eastern and southern suburbs from Bondi and Vaucluse to Sutherland. The area also includes Sydney's Central Business District and Sydney Airport.

The Contact Tracing Team has worked closely with colleagues at the Ministry of Health and in other areas of NSW to trace other contacts as needed, including providing assistance to Victoria in July. At the peak of the pandemic there were 18 contact tracers in the team. This is scaled up and down according to need.

While there have been no locally acquired cases notified in SESLHD since 14 October, there has been more than 800 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the local health district since the start of the pandemic, with 96 percent of cases having a status of 'recovered' at three weeks after illness onset.

Dr Adam Capon, Manager, Contact Tracing Team, in SESLHD's Public Health Unit, said contact tracing is a critical tool in stopping the spread of COVID-19.

"Contact tracing is about finding people who have been in contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19. It allows us to isolate those people who may be infected with the COVID-19 virus before they spread it to someone else," Dr Capon said.

The important work of the Contact Tracing Team was highlighted in October when a new locally-acquired case of COVID-19 in the Kingsford area without a known source of infection was investigated.

Several venues were identified as places of potential exposure and anyone who visited the venues were asked to be aware of symptoms and immediately isolate and get tested should even the mildest of symptoms occur. The investigation included testing of contacts for antibodies, which revealed this case was linked to a person who likely had an earlier unrecognised COVID-19 infection.

"The best thing everyone can do is adhere to current recommendations regarding physical distancing and hand hygiene. If you have even the slightest symptoms get tested straight away."

In October, gatherings in outdoor public spaces and group bookings at restaurants in NSW increased to 30 people under an easing of COVID-19 restrictions. With restrictions continuing to ease in NSW, it is important for contact tracers to be able to quickly and effectively trace close contacts. Businesses such as gyms and restaurants are required by law to have a COVID Safety Plan in place, which includes a register of contact details.

“Our contact tracers are experts in disease control, but they need your help. If you are attending a venue make sure you sign in. While we hope the community enjoys getting out and about, please be COVID Safe and register your details with each venue you attend,” Dr Capon said.

People diagnosed with COVID-19 are known as ‘cases’ and the people they have mixed with are known as ‘contacts’. A ‘contact’ may be classified as ‘casual’ where the risk of contracting the virus from the case is possible but unlikely. Casual contacts are asked to monitor for COVID-19 symptoms. ‘Close contacts’ are those who have a higher risk of contracting COVID-19; they must get tested and self-isolate for 14 days.

For the latest information on COVID-19 including current recommendations and safe practices visit the NSW Government COVID-19 website: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19>