

SPEAKOUT

THE MAGAZINE FOR AUSTRALIAN SPEECH PATHOLOGISTS

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Do I still have to perform client-facing work?

COVID-19 FAQ for allied health practitioners

This FAQ has been developed in response to several concerns by SPA members, who are being asked to continue to provide face-to-face allied health services to clients during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to note that the following advice is general in nature and cannot be considered as blanket advice. The employment arrangements for each individual workplace are unique and must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. In addition, the rules may vary depending on your state or territory.

I am a speech pathologist working in a medium sized practice. My direct manager still requires me to come into the practice, but I don't want to do face-to face work. Do I have to come in to work?

While the rules may vary depending on your state or territory, all of Australia is currently under Stage 3 coronavirus restrictions. For example, in Victoria, one of the few exceptions to the current “**stay at home**” and “**restricted activities**” direction is to attend work or education, where you can’t do those things remotely, and that allied health services are allowed to continue to operate as normal.

If your organisation provides a safe workplace and has complied with all of the current Stage 3 restrictions directed by your state or territory, then yes, your manager can reasonably direct you to attend work.

If you feel uncomfortable attending the work site, or seeing clients face-to-face, this is your personal preference, and it is recommended that you request a meeting with your manager to discuss your concerns, and explore with the organisation if there is a way to accommodate your preference to work from home using telehealth. Some organisations have been able to make reasonable adjustments to work, to enable staff to work from home through telehealth, or come to another mutually agreeable arrangement.

If you are unable to come to an agreement with your manager, you may request to access your accrued annual leave entitlements or take leave without pay during this time due to your personal preference to isolate during the pandemic. For help understanding your leave entitlements, please contact [WorkPlacePLUS](#).

If you are feeling unwell or are required to self-isolate for medical reasons, or because you have been exposed to COVID-19, you must not attend work.

Do I have to continue to see clients in their homes?

Please refer to the response to question 1.

The Australian Government Department of Health document dated 6 April 2020, titled '[Fact sheet: In-home care workers](#)', provides the following advice:

“As an in-home care worker, you are providing an essential service. Home care services should be still delivered to care recipients with necessary precautions in place...but it is vitally important during this

unprecedented time that continuity of service by providers is maintained and that we all stay connected...If you are in a group who are considered vulnerable to more serious infection (including aged over 70 years, non-Indigenous and are aged 65 years or older with a chronic illness or are Indigenous and aged 50 years or older with a chronic illness) you should discuss with your employer how best to manage your own risk at work.”

I don't feel safe providing face-to-face services. Do I still have to come in to work?

Your employer is obligated to provide a safe working environment. If your employer complies with [Workplace Health & Safety \(WHS\) laws](#) and have implemented [Government advice on control measures to minimise the spread of COVID-19](#), then yes, your manager can reasonably expect you to attend work.

If your employer is putting you at risk by failing to comply with WHS requirements or failing to implement a robust [infection control policy](#) or [pandemic plan](#), then you may have a reasonable right to refuse to attend work or to be sent home with full pay. For specific advice in this regard, please contact [WorkPlacePLUS](#).

If you hold genuine fears for your health and safety, it is recommended that you request an urgent meeting with your manager to discuss your concerns. If necessary, you can report non-compliance of WHS laws to the [WHS authority in your jurisdiction](#).

See also the response to question 1.

I have not been provided personal protective equipment (PPE). Do I still have to come in to work?

It is important for both the employer and the employee to know infection control measures that may be required by each state or territory. If there is a requirement to wear PPE and your employer does not provide it, then you may have a reasonable right to refuse to attend work or to be sent home with full pay.

If there is no requirement to wear PPE ,and yet you still refuse to attend work because you have not been provided with PPE, this is your personal preference, and it is recommended that you request a meeting with your manager to discuss your concerns, and explore with the organisation if there is a way to accommodate your preference to work from home using telehealth. If you are unable to come to an agreement with your manager, you may request to access your accrued annual leave entitlements or take leave without pay.

In the Australian Government Department of Health webinar with Professor Michael Kidd AM and Dr Andrew Singer, dated 26 March 2020, titled '[COVID-19 response update for allied health practitioners](#)', the advice was that, considering the worldwide shortage of PPE, priority should be given to practitioners working with high risk clients, or suspected or known cases of COVID-19, and therefore practitioners need to make their own risk assessments based on individual clients, and, “where a client is currently low risk, there is no need for you to wear personal protective equipment.”



As part of the Government's above-mentioned [COVID-19 response update for primary care and allied health practitioners series](#), the Australian Government Department of Health offered another webinar on 9 April 2020, where Professor Michael Kidd AM, Dr Nick Coatsworth and Penny Shakespeare answered questions from health care workers across all care settings including allied health. You can access the recording [here](#).

The Australian Government Department of Health document [Information on surgical masks - Version 5 \(26/03/2020\)](#) [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#) provides the following advice to health care workers:

"During the course of their work, health care workers may be exposed to patients who are suspected or confirmed of having COVID-19. When caring for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, health care workers are required to wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) (masks, gloves, eye shields and/or gowns) to protect themselves from infectious illnesses and help stop the spread of disease. The PPE required will depend on the type of interaction. It is important that our health workforce remains strong and healthy during this time."

Information for health care workers looking after patients in hospitals and non-inpatients is available at [www.health.gov.au/covid19-resources](#).

See also the response to question 1.

As far as I am aware, my workplace has not implemented an infection control policy or pandemic plan. What should I do?

While infection control requirements may vary depending on your state or territory, all staff should be required to practice social distancing and good hygiene practices, which should be detailed in their [infection control policy](#) and [pandemic plan](#). If you are not aware of your workplace's infection control policy or pandemic plan, you should request a copy from your manager.

By now, all employers should have had their crisis team meetings, operationalised their pandemic plan regarding COVID-19, and provided regular communications and updates to their staff. If you believe that this has not occurred in your workplace, you should discuss your concerns with your manager.

Employers who need assistance creating or updating infection control or pandemic planning policies and documentation should contact [WorkPlacePLUS](#) for support. Further resources for the healthcare sector can also be found [here](#).

I have tried to raise my concerns with my manager, but nothing has been resolved. What should I do?

It is important that open communication is maintained so that all parties can work together to find the best solutions to any issues or concerns. If you require tailored support or further advice on how to manage discussions with your employer during the COVID-19 pandemic, please contact [WorkPlacePLUS](#).

During this difficult time, it is best-practice for employers take a compassionate approach to resolving any concerns that their employees may have. Practitioners or staff who choose to withdraw their services would generally receive unpaid leave; however, employers may offer paid leave or alternative working arrangements in these unusual pandemic circumstances. Remember that you simply cannot take this advice on board without considering the unique circumstances of your workplace—it is highly recommended that you [seek specific advice](#). Most importantly, practice owners, speech pathologists and staff should always make clear, direct communication a priority.

**Anna Pannuzzo
Director of WorkPlacePLUS**

SPA members receive special member benefits with WorkPlacePLUS for support with HR & IR issues affecting your practice. For more information, contact Anna on 0419 533 434 or visit [www.WorkPlacePLUS.com.au](#).



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Speech
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How SPA members can redeem their entitlements with WorkPlacePLUS



1

► Make Contact phone (03) 9492 0958

SPA members can contact WorkPlacePLUS Director, Anna Pannuzzo, by phone or email. She will ask for their full name, membership number, state of residence and whether they are an employer, employee or independent contractor.

2

► Receive General Advice

SPA members receive a **FREE** initial phone consultation regarding HR issues affecting your health practice.

The advice provided during the initial phone consultation is general in nature.

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3

► Review the Estimate & Agreement

If you require tailored advice for specific issues, WorkPlacePLUS will provide a cost estimate* and formal agreement for you to review.

* SPA members also receive a discount on WorkPlacePLUS standard consultancy rates.

To proceed with engaging WorkPlacePLUS, you will need to sign off on the agreement and cost estimate.

4

► Engage WorkPlacePLUS

Once WorkPlacePLUS receives the signed agreement, an experienced consultant will be allocated.

5

► Receive Specific, Tailored Support

A WorkPlacePLUS consultant will work with you to develop and implement strategies to address the specific issues in your workplace.



SPA members can engage WorkPlacePLUS again in the future by returning to step 1 of this consultation process.

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