

SA's rapid antigen test ban needs a rapid rethink

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As borders open and South Australians learn to live with COVID-19 while a possibly more infectious strain emerges, we need to deploy every weapon at our disposal to keep businesses and communities operating.

That includes rapid antigen testing.

In past weeks, these handy tests have appeared in supermarkets and chemists around Australia yet any South Australian business which uses them to detect COVID, without obtaining a specific SA Health exemption, is breaking the law.

SA Health has indicated they are likely to be rolled out if community transmission occurs and now that this has happened, it's time for these tests to be given the green light.

More than one billion of these tests have been legally administered across the globe including in every Australian state, excluding Western Australia and South Australia.

Rapid COVID tests, approved by the TGA, have been proven as a useful screening tool for early detection so surely it is in our State's interest to draw up sensible guidelines and roll them out more widely as COVID cases in our community inevitably climb.

Victoria has introduced rapid antigen testing in schools after the Doherty Institute recommended a "test to stay" approach, the UK is urging residents to take the tests before mixing indoors this northern hemisphere winter, while Germany has just donated 300,000 tests for use in Sri Lanka's hospital system.

The tests have been used to get workers back to assembly lines and on factory floors quickly, made concerts and large-scale events possible and provided a confidence boost on international travel routes.

They have been used to make employees feel safer in the workplace.

There is no question that vaccination will remain Australia's first and most critical line of defence against COVID-19, followed by mask wearing, contact tracing, social distancing, cleaning, hand washing and more.

It's also clear that rapid tests are less reliable and cannot, in all instances, replace the highly accurate PCR tests that South Australians have become accustomed to.

Nor will they suit many businesses who through social distancing and other measures can comfortably reduce risks without this extra burden.

But rapid antigen tests produce results in as little as 15 minutes and as far as screening goes, can play a vital role in preventing many undiagnosed and asymptomatic COVID patients from entering sites where transmission is difficult to control or where people are vulnerable, such as in nursing homes.

They can help keep businesses operating and our economy growing.

With COVID likely to become a greater part of daily life in South Australia, it's time for a rapid rethink on rapid antigen testing.

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