

TRANSCRIPT

Innes Willox, Chief Executive of the national employer association Ai Group

COVID Task Force Meeting – Sydney Lockdown

ABC News Breakfast with Lisa Millar and Michael Rowland

Thursday 8 July 2021, 8:15am

JOURNALIST: Aussies could be lining up to get their COVID shots in Bunnings car parks in in future. That was one of the suggestions to speed up the vaccine rollout. Innes Willox is the chief executive of the Australian industry group. He was also in that meeting and he joins us now. A lot of people said this meeting came too late, that business should've been involved way earlier than this. Do you think there was some progress made?

WILLOX: There was a lot of progress made. The Government has made it clear they wanted to focus on the more vulnerable, the elderly first, and then a bigger rollout. We had a lot of progress. We're going to see a lot of vaccine coming in mid-September and business needs time to gear up to contribute to the vaccine rollout.

JOURNALIST: Practically, we talked about Bunnings car parks. How will this roll out? At business sites?

WILLOX: What we're looking to do, and there's still a lot more work to do, you have logistical work, supply work to do. A lot like the flu vaccine. When people at work come and get their flu vaccine, the provision of it would be the same from a COVID vaccine perspective. But also what we're looking to do is broaden it out to staff members' families, customers, and then the rural and remote communities, the broader community as well.

You need some indemnity for that.

JOURNALIST: Are you going to get that?

WILLOX: That's what we talked a lot about. The government has indemnity, the GPs have indemnity, pharmaceutical companies have indemnity. If you're going to roll out a COVID vaccine, you can't do it any other way. Just for that one in a million chance that something goes wrong.

JOURNALIST: A lot of talk about war gaming the response. Does anyone think it peculiar a 3-star general has to be brought in to do this job?

WILLOX: Well, he was super impressive yesterday, I have to say ... right to the point ... like you expect a general to be. This is a huge logistical exercise. And it's important that we get it right. In trying to pull together a whole lot of different threads. Businesses can't do it on their own.

JOURNALIST: And the government has shown it can't do it.

WILLOX: The government is trying to do it and it's done it so far and now this is taking it to the next stage. We want to help. Businesses are actually trying to step up to the plate here.

JOURNALIST: Can I talk to you about Sydney. We heard from the New South Wales Minister suggesting if they couldn't get this particular outbreak under control, we'll be forced to live with it, in Sydney. That seems like a pretty major shift in policy.

WILLOX: It's a different approach. But we've had COVID now for 18 months. It's never going to go away. We're going to live in a COVID impacted world. How we choose to live in that world is the big question. But this is where the vaccine comes into it. If we can roll out the vaccine quickly between late September and the end of the year, we can move to a new phase and that's what we have to do. The big prize in this is opening our borders, opening our internal borders, ending lockdowns, that's what we're all aspiring to.

JOURNALIST: You say the Government is trying to do the best it can. In business, as you well know, chief executives operate on KPIs, they're answerable to the board. The Prime Minister is presiding over a vaccination rate of less than 10%. If he's a chief executive, what would the board be saying to him? And this dismal vaccine rollout?

WILLOX: The Prime Minister is one key part. He's got a lot of line reports and they're the state premiers as well. Everyone has to pull together. We have issues around supply, the AstraZeneca situation that has thrown a curve ball. Now is the opportunity to say let's step it up and get it done. That's sort - Christmas is the time frame.

JOURNALIST: We keep hearing from Greg Hunt about it being a competitive global environment, everyone is after the same thing. How confident should we be of the promised 30 million odd Pfizer doses arriving on our shores?

WILLOX: We were told yesterday, this is the part of the big rollout we're prepared for, we should be looking to mid-September for a big influx of supply of Pfizer and hopefully Moderna as well. And that will really push things along once we get that supply. This is a supply and a delivery exercise we're involved in.

JOURNALIST: Just one last question on Sydney, the fact the lockdown may well go on, \$1 billion a week the Daily Telegraph is splashing. Josh Frydenberg has ruled out any further JobKeeper. What needs to be done here?

WILLOX: Well, firstly hopefully we can end the lockdown as quickly as possible and get back to something like normality. But businesses need support. And the big lesson out of all of the Melbourne lockdowns we've had is that support needs to come immediately, it can't wait. Businesses just can't hang on. That's the key point here. So businesses need some sort of support. We're not going to get JobKeeper again. Everyone accepts that. But there needs to be timely targeted support for businesses to get through. It's not just the cafes and restaurants, it's all their suppliers as well. It has huge rippling impacts on the economy and on jobs. And quite frankly, we'll be living with the economic impact of COVID once we have adjusted to the health impact.

JOURNALIST: Thanks for coming in.