



30 November 2022

Submission to Australia's New International Development Policy

Breathing Life into Health Systems in the Indo-Pacific Region

The Every Breath Counts Coalition is writing to encourage the Federal Government of Australia to play a leadership role in providing medical oxygen support to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in the Indo-Pacific region experiencing, or at risk of, oxygen shortages.

Most of the countries in the region experienced an oxygen crisis during the pandemic, especially India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, LaoPDR, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Viet Nam, and Sri Lanka. As hospitals ran out of oxygen during the height of the Delta wave of the virus, patients were left to die in the parking lots of hospitals, on the backseats of cars, and in their homes, as devastated family members struggled to help.

There are no official estimates of just how many COVID-19 deaths were due to lack of access to medical oxygen in the region, but hospital and media reports suggest it was high.

As you know, the critical need for more oxygen to “Save Lives Now” was highlighted by the US President at the Global COVID-19 Summit on 22 September 2021. The USAID Administrator, **Samantha Power**, did not mince words when she described international support for oxygen as “piecemeal and reactive” and called on other donors to mobilize \$US2 billion to prevent further oxygen shortages.

So far, the **ACT-Accelerator Oxygen Emergency Taskforce** - the international, multilateral effort responsible for helping LMICs avert oxygen shortages has provided around \$US1 billion worth of oxygen supplies to more than 100 countries. Most of this has been delivered through the Global Fund and Unitaid financed by the Governments of the US, Germany, France, Canada, and the Netherlands.

We acknowledge the critical oxygen support the Australian Government provided to neighbors in trouble during the pandemic. It has made a difference. Yet still, many countries in the region struggle.

Oxygen is a treatment for more than 20 health conditions, including newborns in respiratory distress, children with infectious diseases like pneumonia, adults with non-communicable conditions like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and more. Oxygen is also needed for safe surgery. Health systems need adequate supplies of oxygen and the trained staff to operate and maintain the equipment to meet this massive need.

Now with the region facing the triple threats of COVID-19, climate change, and conflict, health systems are under enormous pressure to provide the oxygen required to treat all of these conditions, and prepare for the risk of further respiratory pandemics where surge capacity will be needed.

Australia is well-positioned to strengthen health systems in the region to improve routine oxygen delivery and to prepare for future pandemics - not only because of the country's strong track record of oxygen aid for COVID, but because Australia is home to some of the leading global experts on oxygen access.

From Professor **Trevor Duke** and his team at the University of Melbourne, to Dr **Hamish Graham** and colleagues at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), to oxygen innovators like **FREO2** (funded by the **UK Government**), Australians are generating critical oxygen research and innovations that are shaping the global response. Much of this research has been generated by Australian researchers working in Papua New Guinea, LaoPDR, Indonesia, and the Pacific islands.

Australia has more Commissioners and Advisory Group members on the new **Lancet Global Health Commission on Medical Oxygen Security** than any other country - Professors Amy Gray, Trevor Duke, Steve Graham, Barbara

McPake, and Hamish Graham. This Commission will publish its report in September 2024, and will no doubt include much Australian scholarship, as the University of Melbourne and MCRI are co-chairing the entire initiative.

Further, Australian national and state policies on medical oxygen are best practice and could act as a model for the region. Pulse oximetry and oxygen are a basic standard of care described in the **Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards (NSQHS)**.

ACSQHC National Consensus Statement describes pulse oximetry measurements (SpO2) as one of a core set of six vital signs that should be done on all acutely unwell or deteriorating patients, and recommends that these should be monitored at least once per eight-hour shift. Australia has national guidelines for the use of oxygen in **adults** and **children**, and pulse oximetry and oxygen are included in a myriad of specific clinical guidelines for hospital and home care for acute and chronic conditions.

Oxygen-related equipment and oxygen supplies are included as core health service infrastructure for health facilities (a state responsibility) and with federal funding for oxygen services for aged care to residential and home care providers (a federal responsibility). For home use, oxygen-related equipment is covered by state-based mechanisms for funding **essential medicines/equipment** and recognised on the national Essential Medical Equipment Payment (EMEP) scheme.

A robust medical oxygen support program nested within Australian's new International Development Policy would enable the government to make simultaneous progress on helping countries in the region accelerate achievement of most of the health Sustainable Development Goals, improve pandemic preparedness and response, and strengthen regional health security. We must never forget the **civil disturbances** that occurred when hospitals run out of oxygen during the pandemic - reducing people's trust in the health system and stoking outrage towards governments.

As the international oxygen emergency taskforce pivots to a Global Oxygen Alliance, chaired by Unitaid, Australia would also have the opportunity to leverage the funding, expertise, and regional networks already created by taskforce members (e.g., WHO, UNICEF, Global Fund, World Bank, USAID, etc), reducing transactional costs and increasing impact.

We urge the Australian Government to become a regional leader in access to medical oxygen and target support to the countries with fragile health systems to save lives now and reduce the risk of mass fatalities due to lack of access to this essential medicine.

Sincerely,

Leith

Leith Greenslade
Coordinator
Every Breath Counts Coalition
<http://www.stopneumonia.org>



*The **Every Breath Counts Coalition** is a global alliance of more than 100 organizations from the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors working together to help low- and middle-income countries reduce deaths from respiratory infections. The Coalition has a special focus on increasing access to medical oxygen and is a member of the international taskforce leading the emergency oxygen response.*