



## QUICK GUIDE

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# Australian pandemic response planning: a quick guide

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This is one of three Library publications that outline emergency and pandemic planning arrangements that were in place prior to 2020, and actual arrangements established in 2020 to coordinate the national response to COVID-19.

1. *National emergency and disaster response arrangements in Australia: a quick guide* explains the overarching decision-making framework designed to manage crisis events of all kinds.
2. *Australian pandemic response planning: a quick guide* (this publication) outlines the standing health emergency plans that were in place prior to the advent of COVID-19 in 2020, including the National Pandemic Influenza Plan.
3. *Australian COVID-19 response management arrangements: a quick guide* explains the specific decision-making and advisory bodies involved in the national COVID-19 response, as at April 2020.

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## Overview

Australia is required, under [The International Health Regulations \(2005\)](#), to develop and maintain 'capacity to respond promptly and effectively to public health risks and public health emergencies of international concern' (Article 13).

Australia has a series of standing health emergency plans, ordered from high level policy down to operational detail. Under these plans, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for the management of communicable disease emergencies; however, national (local, state, territory and Australian Government) coordination is activated if a national response is necessary. The plans are formally activated as required.

Since a pandemic affects not only the health sector but virtually all other parts of the economy and society, the government planning and administrative arrangements are necessarily complex.

This Quick Guide explains these arrangements, setting out the plans (and supporting legislation). In each section, the Guide distinguishes between 'Australian' (referring to Commonwealth bodies and arrangements) and 'national' (referring to Commonwealth, state and territory bodies and arrangements). The term 'whole-of-government' refers to all-agency cooperation and can apply to either Australian or national or both.

## The national strategic approach to emergency management

The [Australian Emergency Management Arrangements](#) (2019) outlines 11 emergency management principles that provide guidance and a broad understanding of the approaches to emergency management in Australia.

Australia's strategic approach to emergency management emphasises the importance of seeing the management of any hazard within an ongoing cycle of activities in the four areas of **Prevention, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery**. Every response plan is organised to progress through those stages.

### **Australian Government Disaster Response Plan**

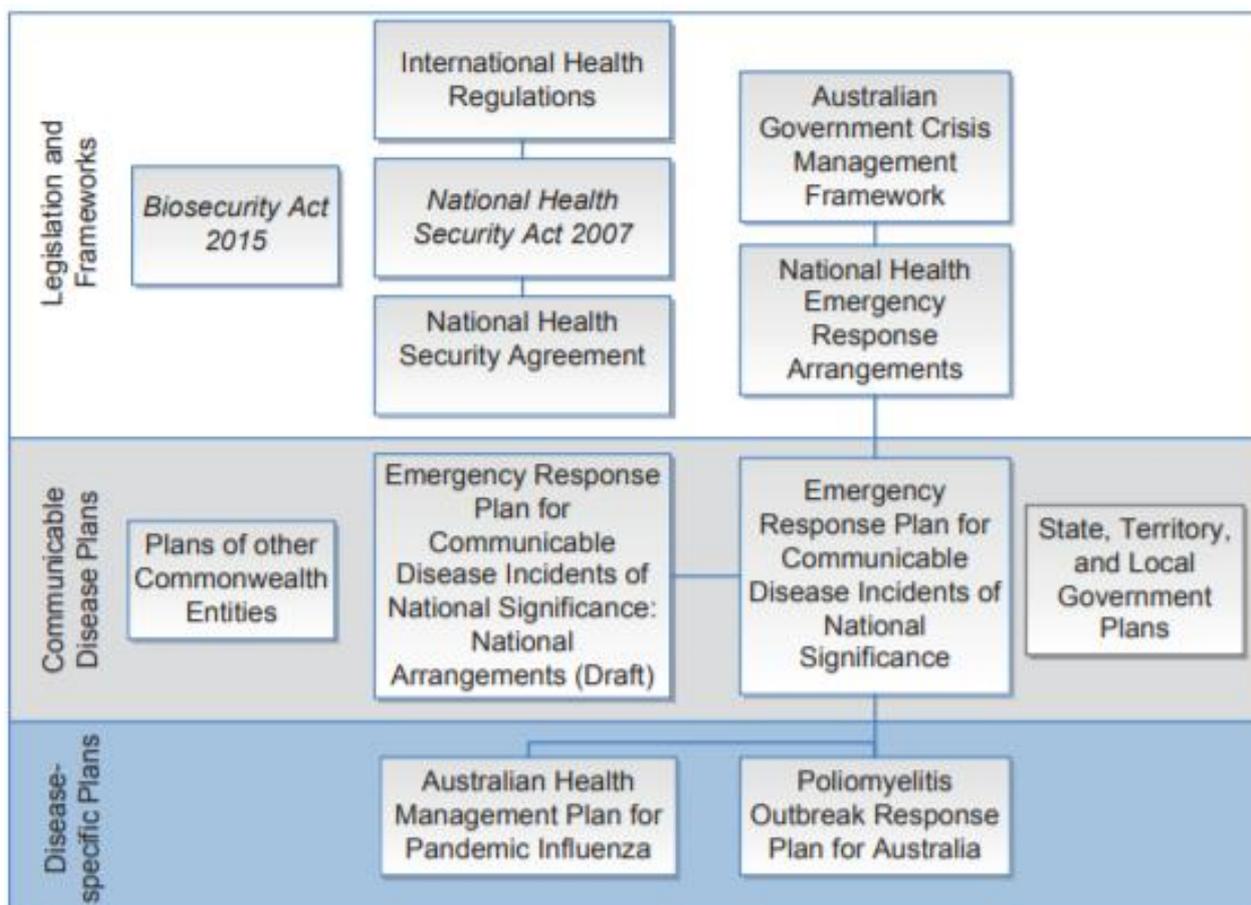
The [COMDISPLAN 2017: Australian Government Disaster Response Plan](#) (December 2017) is the plan for the provision of Australian Government **non-financial assistance** to Australian states and territories in an emergency or disaster. The Minister with responsibility for emergency management must authorise approval for the provision of Australian Government non-financial assistance.

*COMDISPLAN* explains how the Australian Government responds to requests for assistance from state and territory governments responding to a disaster. It can be activated for any disaster or emergency regardless of the cause.

## Planning framework

**Figure 1** provides an outline of the interaction of legislation, frameworks and plans relevant to the emergency management of communicable disease. (Note that the [Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance: National Arrangements](#) is no longer a draft. See below.)

**Figure 1: interaction of legislation, frameworks and plans relevant to communicable disease**



Source: Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), [Department of Health's coordination of communicable disease emergencies](#), Audit report, 57, 2016–17, ANAO, Canberra, 2017, p. 18.

### ***Parallel whole of government and health sector emergency response plans***

At each level of the health emergency response, there are parallel planning documents for the whole-of-government response and the health sector response. The highest level national whole-of-government plan is the [Australian Government Crisis Management Framework](#) (December 2017) (**AGCMF**).

The highest level national health plan is the [National Health Emergency Response Arrangements](#) (November 2011) (**NatHealth Arrangements**). The NatHealth Arrangements direct how the Australian health sector (incorporating state and territory health authorities and relevant Commonwealth agencies) would work cooperatively and collaboratively to contribute to the response to, and recovery from, emergencies of national consequence.

At lower levels, the parallel plans often have similar names which can be confusing. For example, the whole-of-government [Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance: National Arrangements: National CD Plan](#) (May 2018) (the **National CD Plan**) is the key planning and coordination document to guide cross-government arrangements, and it operates in parallel with the key health sector coordinating document, the [Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance](#) (September 2016) (the **CD Plan**) (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: parallel health sector and whole-of-government CD plans**



Source: [National CD Plan](#), p. 4.

### ***Communicable Disease Incident of National Significance***

Communicable disease emergencies have unique characteristics which affect planning and response. These are described at pages 19–20 of the National CD Plan. In particular, these emergencies have the potential to overwhelm systems for managing disease. An effective response requires high levels of pre-planning and coordination.

A communicable disease emergency is initially managed at a local, state and territory level. Once it reaches a level that requires implementation of national health policy, national interventions and public messaging, or deployment of Commonwealth or inter-jurisdictional resources to assist affected jurisdictions, it is declared a Communicable Disease Incident of National Significance (CDINS) which is the trigger for activation of the CD Plan.

Once a CDINS requires national whole-of-government coordination, the National CD Plan is activated. The National CD Plan activates the AGCMF and the health emergency response is then managed within the AGCMF. The AGCMF identifies the lead ministers for response to, and recovery from, a crisis. It also designates a series of key Commonwealth and national cross-government committees.

### ***National Pandemic Influenza Plan***

The [Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza—AHPPMI](#) (August 2019) (**Pandemic Influenza Plan**) outlines Australia’s strategy to manage an influenza pandemic and minimise its impact on the health of Australians and our health system. Substantial [changes were made in 2014](#) to the Pandemic Influenza Plan to take into account the recommendations of the [Review of Australia’s Health Sector Response to Pandemic \(H1N1\) 2009—Lessons Identified](#) and developments in the approach to pandemic response within the international community. It was revised again and republished in August 2019.

A key goal of the Pandemic Influenza Plan is to ‘achieve a response that is proportionate to the level of risk’:

A response that is appropriate to the level of impact the emergency is likely to have on the community, and on vulnerable populations within the community, will make the best use of the resources available and minimise social disruption. (Page 18)

## Strategic health management tools

### ***National system of public health surveillance***

The [National Health Security Act 2007](#) provides a national system of public health surveillance to enhance the capacity of the Commonwealth and the states and territories to identify, and respond to, public health events of national significance.

As required under Article 4 of *The International Health Regulations (2005)*, the Act establishes a National Focal Point to liaise with responsible Commonwealth, state or territory bodies, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other countries in relation to public health events of national significance.

### ***National Medical Stockpile***

The [National Medical Stockpile](#) (the Stockpile) is managed by the Department of Health. The stockpile is:

a strategic reserve of drugs, vaccines, antidotes and protective equipment for use in the national response to a public health emergency which could arise from natural causes or terrorist activities. Items are stockpiled to increase Australia's level of self-sufficiency during a time of potential high global and domestic demand and service delivery pressures.

Following a [performance audit](#) by the Australian National Audit Office in 2014, a four year reform agenda was implemented to improve the cost effectiveness of the stockpiling arrangements.

### ***Declaration of a human biosecurity emergency***

The [Biosecurity Act 2015](#) (Cth) gives the Commonwealth Minister for Health expansive powers to issue directions and set requirements in order to combat a human biosecurity emergency. The Governor-General [declared a human biosecurity emergency](#) on 18 March 2020 (see the Parliamentary Library Flagpost '[COVID-19 human biosecurity emergency declaration explainer](#)' for more information).

## Further reading

B Bennett, T Carney and R Bailey, '[Emergency powers and pandemics: federalism and the management of public health emergencies in Australia](#)', *The University of Tasmania Law Review*, 31(1), 2012, pp. 37–57.

T Carney, R Bailey and B Bennett, '[Pandemic planning as risk management: how fared the Australian federation?](#)', *Journal of Law and Medicine*, 19(3) March 2012, pp. 550–568.

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