



21 September 2021

The Hon Greg Hunt MP  
Minister for Health and Aged Care  
PO Box 6022  
House of Representatives, Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

### **Building public confidence: COVID-19 transmission, indoor air quality, and ventilation**

As participants on the *COVID and Ventilation Roundtable* held on Friday, 3 September, we are writing to call for the development of credible, government-endorsed, public information regarding the airborne transmission of COVID-19 and the importance of indoor air quality within buildings.

The roundtable included a diverse range of industry peak bodies that are committed to providing safe and healthy indoor environments, including building managers, designers, contractors, consultants, and standards organisations.

Our collective view is that more substantial guidance on this issue, endorsed by both government and industry, is vital for Australians to return to workplaces and other buildings confidently, safely, and sustainably. It would also help accelerate a much-needed dialogue about the longer-term role of buildings in public health.

Despite early caution, the airborne transmissibility of COVID-19 is now evidence-based and widely acknowledged by government, global public health authorities, and experts from various health, engineering, and design disciplines. It has also become clear that the risk of airborne transmission is more acute in poorly ventilated buildings, with causal links being made to outbreaks in hotel quarantine, aged care, schools, hospitals, and numerous workplaces and public venues.

Recent media reports have focused on the role of indoor air quality, especially ventilation, in mitigating the risk of transmission within buildings. Such developments are encouraging, as they allude to emerging community awareness about the broader suite of measures—beyond social distancing and hygiene—required to mitigate risks of airborne transmission.

Such awareness must be reinforced by credible guidance that provides practical measures, is tailored for different audience types, and establishes realistic expectations about what can be achieved depending on the building type, design, usage, services, and age.

Better ventilation—whether by smart design, mechanical systems, or other solutions—can help reduce the airborne concentration of COVID-19, but it must be considered as part of a broader mitigation strategy that also includes other technical, socio-behavioural, and organisational measures.

For the existing building stock, owners and operators will need to take a proactive approach that considers a range of factors unique to each building while also considering potential knock-on effects for thermal comfort, energy usage, and other amenities.

Options may include building and ventilation system modifications, changes to system settings, and, importantly, a new focus on ventilation performance through monitoring, service, and maintenance.

Unencumbered by existing constraints, new buildings have an expanded range of options available but will require building designers to begin applying existing safety-in-design principles to risks posed by COVID-19 and other airborne pathogens.

Whether applied to existing or new buildings, all options available for risk mitigation require a shift in mindset across much of the community, reinforcing the need for a coordinated approach with endorsement from government, health, and industry.

Government information currently available on this issue is sparse, generic, and diffused across various sources and websites. It also fails to provide the targeted guidance needed for different building and audience types. As a result, it lacks the coherence necessary to achieve cut-through, instil confidence, and elicit action.

Finally, we would like to emphasise that responding to these challenges presents an opportunity to establish a long-overdue *public* discourse around the importance of indoor air quality for health outcomes. Changes to the design of buildings and cities have proven effective in response to previous public health outbreaks (tuberculosis, Spanish flu, SARS and MERS), and there is an increasing body of research demonstrating the long-term benefits of better indoor air quality for occupant safety, well-being, and productivity.

The building industry has an important role to play. As participants on the COVID and Ventilation Industry Roundtable, we are committed to working together and with government to provide leadership and technical expertise to assist with the immediate and longer-term public health response to COVID-19.

In the coming weeks, the roundtable will be engaging our stakeholder networks, relevant government departments and other agencies to help establish the evidence-base and multi-disciplinary support needed for best practice guidance.

As part of this engagement, participants of the roundtable have already met with Dr Gary Lum, Principal Medical Advisor for the Chief Medical Officer Group, and Dr Maryka Gaudio, Director of the Environmental Health and Climate Change Policy Section within the Health Department.

We would welcome the opportunity to work further with you and your department on this matter and respectfully request a meeting to discuss the ideas raised in this letter.

Sincerely,



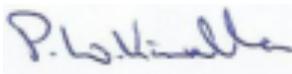
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Tony Gleeson  
Chief Executive Officer  
**Australian Institute of Refrigeration Air Conditioning & Heating**



Scott Williams  
Chief Executive Officer  
**Air Conditioning & Mechanical Contractors Association of Australia**



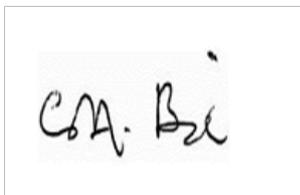
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