



6 May 2020

Safety must come first when resuming clinical radiology and radiation oncology services during COVID-19

Given the success seen in Australia and New Zealand to flatten the COVID-19 incidence curve, RANZCR strongly recommends a cautious, gradual and safety-first return to normal service provision.

COVID-19 will continue to impact on delivery of healthcare for some time, likely until the availability of a vaccine. In Australia and New Zealand, the number of new cases has been declining and there have been continued low rates of hospitalisation. As such, restrictions are continually being reviewed and we have already seen restrictions begin to be relaxed across some jurisdictions. It is prudent as we move from containment efforts to short-term recovery that plans to scale-up operations are carefully balanced.

Clinical radiology and radiation oncology departments and practices have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a range of necessary measures to prepare and reconfigure their operations. As health systems began to be impacted by the pandemic, care was prioritised according to clinical need, service availability and allocation of resources to protect patients and staff. All non-urgent procedures and cases were deferred.

Australia and New Zealand are currently well – placed, among comparable Western nations, to continue to deliver high quality healthcare to our population due to our success to date in containing the spread of COVID-19 throughout our communities. However, considerable uncertainties around the future of COVID-19 remain. Whilst our testing rates are amongst the highest in the world, the numbers of asymptomatic carriers in Australia and New Zealand are not known and may pose a risk to resumption of normal healthcare delivery. Now more than ever, we cannot afford to be complacent. To do so would risk losing the significant gains that have been made in effectively limiting the spread of COVID-19 in Australia and New Zealand.

RANZCR supports a cautious, gradual and safety-first return to usual patterns of healthcare, which has begun in Australia and New Zealand with the resumption of some elective surgeries. RANZCR believes radiology and radiation oncology practices and departments should take a balanced approach to service delivery, taking into account the risks of a COVID-19 resurgence. This risk means that many of the safety changes introduced during the initial response to the pandemic will continue to be needed. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to embrace and build on innovations and pragmatic solutions so that we do not simply return to pre-COVID-19 business-as-usual.

Many factors ought to be considered when resuming services including:

- continuing to limit the risk of COVID-19 infection by retaining infection control measures, including working from home and separation into teams
- ensuring services are delivered according to clinical priority and in consultation with referrers
- managing any risk of patients deteriorating while waiting for services
- active monitoring of waiting lists and regular re-evaluation of patient needs
- appropriate and ongoing communication with patients and referrers
- continuing appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

RANZCR supports resumption of service delivery with the positive adaptations that have been made to limit patient contact, maximise the use of multi-disciplinary teams and provide alternate methods of accessing specialist advice and treatment, including the use of telehealth where appropriate.

It continues to be vital for clinical radiology and radiation oncology staff to have access to appropriate PPE in accordance with jurisdictional guidelines as well as comprehensive training in correct use of PPE. Lack of PPE increases the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to vital staff within radiology and radiation oncology practices and departments, potentially leading to self-quarantine, illness and temporary reduction in availability of services to communities.

Key messages:

- RANZCR strongly recommends a cautious and safety-first approach to scaling up operations during the pandemic to ensure that the gains that have been made in Australia and New Zealand in terms of significantly reducing community transmission are not lost.
- It is critical that patients can continue to receive urgent and necessary care. Practices and departments should cautiously increase service delivery according to local circumstances (risk of COVID-19 transmission and resources available).
- COVID-19 will continue to impact on service delivery for some time. It is imperative that radiology and radiation oncology practices and departments are prepared to quickly revert to a higher level of distancing and restrictions if required.
- Radiology and radiation oncology teams should continue to be supported through the provision of appropriate PPE, in accordance with jurisdictional guidelines for its use, and operational adaptations to reduce risk of COVID-19 infection.

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Approved by:
RANZCR President

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