

Question on Notice

No. 64

Asked on 24 February 2021

MS R BATES ASKED THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AMBULANCE SERVICES (HON Y D'ATH) –

QUESTION

Will the Minister advise how many requests for exemptions to Chief Health Officer directions in relation to funerals have been (a) sought and (b) granted, since restrictions were first established?

ANSWER

The world is in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is a disease that can cause mild symptoms to more severe illness that affects the lungs and can cause death. Keeping Queenslanders safe and preventing the spread of the disease is crucial. COVID-19 can be spread between people in the community when an infected person coughs or sneezes near others. As a Registered Nurse the Member would know that it can also be spread if an infected person has coughed or sneezed onto a surface that might be used by others (like a door handle or mobile phone) and then another person touches their face after touching the contaminated surface.

Funerals and wedding ceremonies, unlike other religious and civil ceremonies, have had restrictions imposed because they are events where social distancing is more difficult to practice, and hugging and other displays of affection are common. Additionally, in comparison to most other religious and civil ceremonies, people are more likely to travel longer distances to attend a funeral or wedding, which may risk greater spread of COVID-19.

On 23 March 2020, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) issued advice for indoor gatherings, including to close licensed venues, gyms, entertain venues and places of worship. AHPPC's advice was for weddings and funerals to occur in very small groups. Initial restrictions such as staggering attendance and reducing number of attendees, were implemented across all jurisdictions in Australia. This advice was in the context of Australia very rapidly reaching 1,000 cases and 'super-spreader' events (at a wedding and a church service) in New South Wales, which demonstrated the risks associated with these environments.

Queensland took additional measures to support the industry and community members to ensure they complied with public health measures. For instance, whilst other jurisdictions have employed generic COVID Safe Plans for the operations of funerals, Queensland has had a funeral-specific protocol in place from the outset to enable people to gather for funerals with due regard for the risk in such setting.

Consideration of alternative or modified arrangements to support family and loved ones to say their farewells have also been encouraged, such as postponing the funeral to allow time for travel and quarantine arrangements, arranging a memorial service at another location, or a live video-stream of the ceremony to allow more people to participate. At all times, restrictions have been eased as soon as practicable and to the extent considered safest under the prevailing epidemiological conditions. Easing principles around these events have aligned with the approach adopted in all jurisdictions across Australia, however states like Victoria and New South Wales have held more stringent restrictions in place for longer to respond to more regular cluster activities and outbreaks.

At various times, attendance limits, domestic border restrictions, and the requirement for mandatory quarantine for people travelling from overseas or from a hotspot have meant that people have sought an exemption in relation to a funeral. This could take the form of an exemption to enter Queensland to attend a funeral and/or to leave quarantine to attend a funeral, or to have more than the permitted number of people attend a funeral. Queensland has had one of the least onerous restrictions in place of all Australian jurisdictions.

For the date range 18 June 2020 to 24 February 2021:

- the Health Directions Exemption Unit received 5,785 requests for exemption from a Public Health Direction that contained the word “funeral”;
- approximately 75% of those requests were closed following a discussion with the applicant and did not progress for decision by the Chief Health Officer or delegate;
- 1,116 applications containing the word “funeral” received an approval of some kind – full or partial – for example, a person may have been approved to enter Queensland but not attend a funeral; and
- there were 212 applications where the word “funeral” was mentioned in an approver’s comments, of those 10 were approved for the purpose of attendance at a funeral in Queensland.