

Research Insights

How do employees feel about COVID-19 vaccination and testing mandates?

Workplaces often involve considerable interpersonal interaction, therefore COVID-19 vaccination and testing mandates may be important tools in reducing transmission of the disease. However, until now it has not been clear how employees would feel about such mandates.

COVID-19 vaccine and testing mandates for a safe workplace

Supply constraints on vaccines have eased and Australia has now reached the target of 80 per cent of the population aged 16 and over fully vaccinated. With this, the National Plan to transition Australia's COVID-19 response calls for a shift in strategy, from suppressing the virus to 'living with the virus' – albeit while continuing to attempt to limit the spread and minimise hospital admissions and fatalities (Australian Government, 2021). To do this, new measures could be adopted in settings where there is considerable interaction between people. Such settings, of course, include many workplaces.

Workplace measures that have been the subject of discussion and debate include mandates for workers to be vaccinated and/or regularly tested. Vaccine mandates are likely to make the workplace safer because vaccinations reduce the risk of severe illness and hospital admissions and may also decrease the probability of transmission among workers and customers.

Frequent COVID-19 testing could be either a complementary or substitute measure to vaccination mandates. They could operate alongside a vaccine mandate (given that vaccinated people may still be infected and infectious), or operate as an alternative to a vaccine mandate, possibly applied only to unvaccinated workers. However, a testing mandate is an imperfect substitute for a vaccination mandate because testing workers regularly is time-consuming and expensive. In addition, the need for immediate results would imply the use of rapid antigen tests, which are less reliable than molecular tests (Dinnes et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Moreover, the virus has an incubation period of up to 14 days, during that time people may produce a negative test result but nonetheless be infectious.

State and federal governments have already been mandating vaccinations and testing for certain groups of workers, including teachers and those employed in aged care and construction. A number of employers have also introduced vaccination mandates for their employees. While there has been considerable discussion of whether mandates for workers to be vaccinated and/or regularly tested should be implemented, there is little existing evidence on what employees themselves think of such requirements.

To address this gap, in August and September of 2021, the Taking the Pulse of the Nation (TTPN) Survey asked all employees in the sample about their level of support for each of these measures (see Box 1).

In this Research Insight we present an analysis of employee responses to these questions. We note that lack of support for mandates could reflect broader attitudes to COVID-19 and vaccination, or it could reflect a perception that these are not required for the employee's particular employer/workplace – because there is minimal interpersonal interaction involved for example. It is also possible that an employee may support mandatory vaccination and therefore not support mandatory testing because they perceive it to be redundant.

We consider how support differs across demographic groups and whether there are differences by political voting intention. In addition, because the questions are concerned with the employee's own employer, and not whether employees in general should be subject to mandates, we are able to consider whether those working in higher-risk industries are more or less supportive of mandates by their own employer.¹

BOX 1: MEASUREMENT OF EMPLOYEES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS VACCINE AND COVID-19 TESTING MANDATES

In August and September of 2021, the Taking the Pulse of the Nation (TTPN) Survey asked all employees in the sample to answer the following questions on vaccine and testing mandates:

1. "Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?"
2. "Currently, would you support your employer requiring regular testing for COVID-19 of all its employees?"

Respondents were offered five response options for each question: "strongly support", "somewhat support", "neutral", "somewhat do not support" or "strongly do not support."

¹While we present only descriptive statistics, most of the findings we report here are robust to a 'regression approach' that examines statistical associations when holding all else equal. For example, our finding that women are less supportive of vaccine mandates by their employer could reflect the fact they are more likely to work in less exposed industries, but we find that, holding industry of employment (and other factors) constant, women are still significantly less supportive of a vaccine mandate. In our discussion of the descriptive statistics that follows, we note the few instances where the findings from the descriptive analysis diverge from the regression analysis.

Key Insights

1 The majority of employees are in favour of their employer mandating vaccination and regular testing

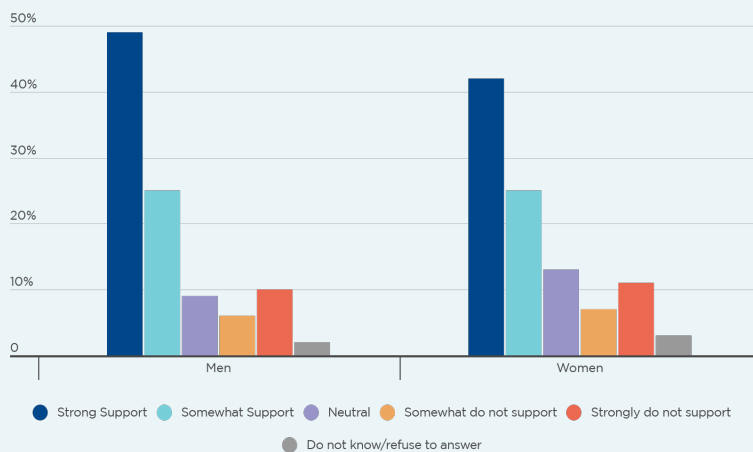
There is considerable support among workers for their employer to mandate vaccination and make regular testing a requirement. Figure 1 shows that around 70 per cent of employees are either strongly or somewhat supportive of a vaccine mandate, while approximately 15 per cent of employees express opposition to such a mandate.

Female employees are less supportive than male employees, with two-thirds supportive of a vaccine mandate compared with nearly three-quarters of male employees. However, much of this difference reflects a higher proportion of women being neutral rather than opposed to a mandate.

Support for regular COVID-19 testing (Figure 2) is also quite high, although slightly lower than support for a vaccine mandate due to fewer employees being strongly supportive and more employees adopting a neutral position. As with vaccine mandates, female employees have lower levels of support than male employees.

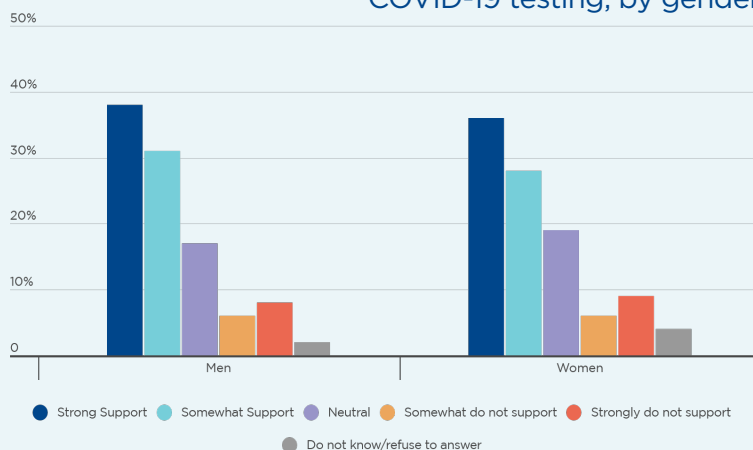
Consistent with Figures 1 and 2, we find that patterns of support are very similar for vaccine and regular testing mandates, and so the remainder of this Research Insight presents results only for support for a vaccine mandate.²

Figure 1: Employee support for a vaccine mandate by their employer, by gender



Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employees (N=1635). The proportions (%) in the vertical axis are weighted. Survey question: "Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?" - Strongly support/Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don't know/refuse to answer.

Figure 2: Employee support for their employer requiring regular COVID-19 testing, by gender



Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employees (N=1635). The proportions (%) in the vertical axis are weighted. Survey question: "Currently, would you support your employer requiring regular testing for COVID-19 of all its employees?" - Strongly support/Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don't know/refuse to answer.

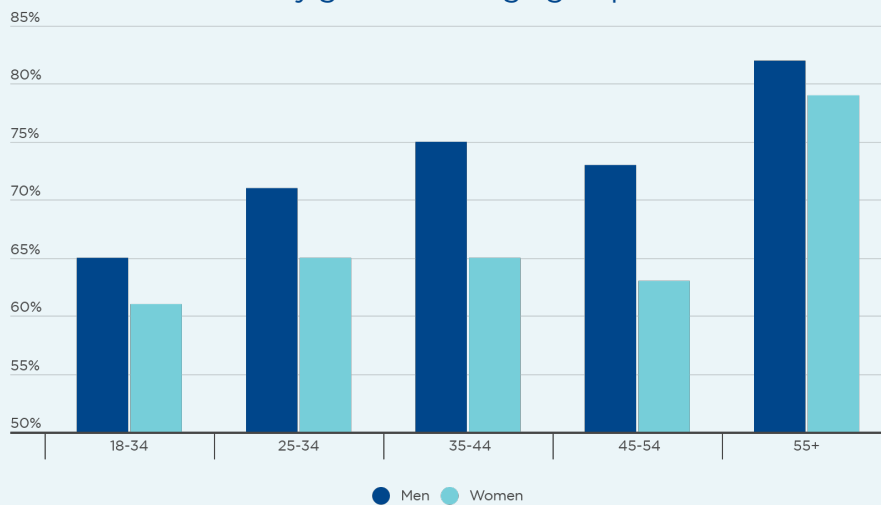
² Support for a vaccine mandate is also easier to interpret, since lack of support for regular testing may be because it is perceived as redundant if everyone is vaccinated.

2 Older employees and more educated employees are more likely to support vaccine mandates

There is majority support (combining ‘strongly support’ and ‘somewhat support’ responses) for a vaccine mandate in all age groups (Figure 3), but employees aged 55 and over are the most likely to support a vaccine mandate. (Other differences across the age groups are evident in the figure, but we find these are not statistically significant once we control for other factors using a regression approach.)

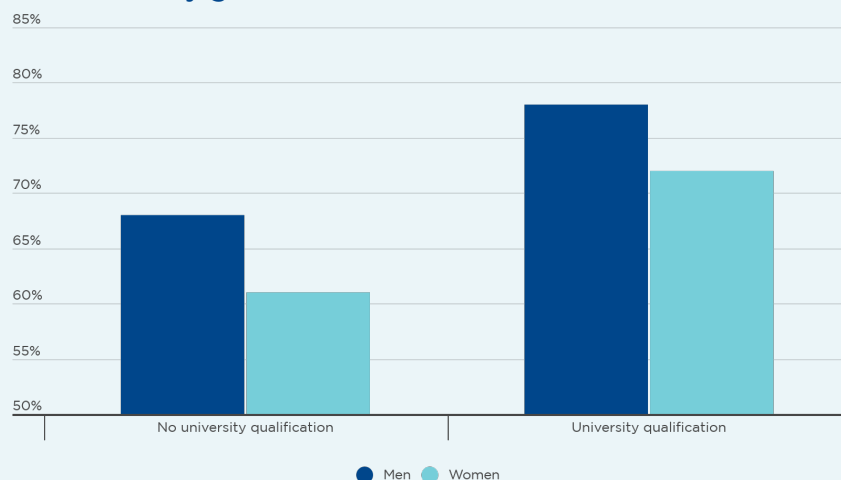
Figure 4 shows that support is considerably higher among employees with a university degree. Among employees with university qualifications, 78 per cent of males and 72 per cent of females are supportive of their employer making vaccination mandatory, compared with respective proportions of 68 per cent and 61 per cent of those without university qualifications.

Figure 3: Employee support for a vaccine mandate, by gender and age group



Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employees (N=1635). Survey question: “Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?” – Strongly support/Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don’t know/refuse to answer. The vertical axis indicates the weighted proportions (%) of employees who answer “Strongly support” or “Somewhat support.”

Figure 4: Employee support for a vaccine mandate, by gender and educational attainment



Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employees excluding self-employed (N=1635). Survey question: “Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?” – Strongly support/Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don’t know/refuse to answer. The vertical axis indicates the weighted proportions (%) of employees who answer “Strongly support” or “Somewhat support.” No university qualification includes the categories “below year 10”, “year 10”, “year 11”, “year 12 or equivalent”, “certificate iii/iv”, “advanced diploma”. University qualification includes the categories “bachelor degree”, “graduate diploma or certificate”, “postgraduate degree.”

3 Workers living in Western Australia and Queensland are less likely to support vaccine mandates

There is a strong correlation between COVID-19 community transmission and support for mandatory vaccination. New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory were experiencing lockdowns due to COVID-19 outbreaks during the survey period and have relatively high rates of support for an employer vaccine mandate (Figure 5). By contrast, employees in Western Australia and

Queensland are the least likely to support vaccine mandates. Somewhat anomalously, South Australia also appears to have a high degree of support for a vaccine mandate. However, a regression approach that controls for other factors influencing mandate support (such as educational attainment) reveals that, all else equal, South Australian employees also have relatively low support for a vaccine mandate.

Figure 5: Employee support for a vaccine mandate, by state and territory



Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employees (N=1635). Survey question: "Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?" - Strongly support/Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don't know/refuse to answer. The vertical axis indicates the weighted proportions (%) of employees who answer "Strongly support" or "Somewhat support."

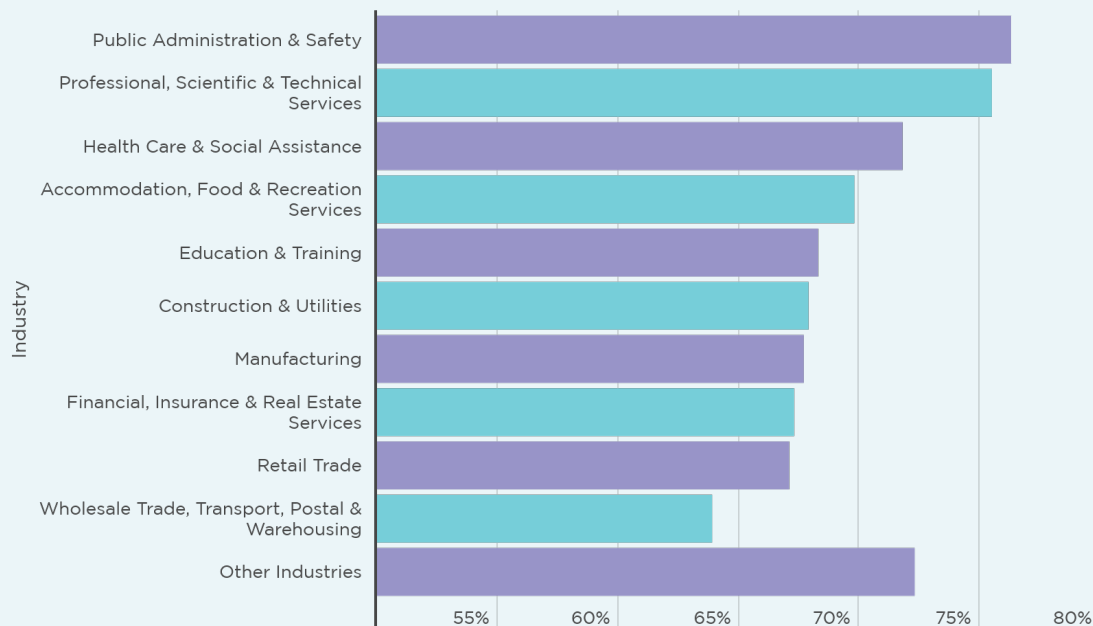
4 In all industries there is strong support for a vaccine mandate, but support is weaker in some high-exposure industries

Figure 6 shows that in all industries a clear majority of workers support their employer mandating vaccination. However, there is variation in the level of support. Interestingly, a number of industries that require a high degree of interaction among workers and with the public report lower rates of support. The proportion of employees supporting a vaccine mandate by their employer is less than 70 per cent in accommodation, food and recreation services, education and training, construction and utilities, manufacturing, retail trade and wholesale trade, transport, postal and warehousing industries.

Conversely, employees in professional, scientific and technical services industries, which tend to have greater potential for minimal interpersonal interaction, have a relatively high rate of employee support for a vaccine mandate.

Note, however, that regression analysis shows that these industry differences reflect the attributes of workers (such as sex, age and educational attainment) in those industries: controlling for the effects of these attributes, there are no significant differences across industries.

Figure 6: Employee support for a vaccine mandate, by industry

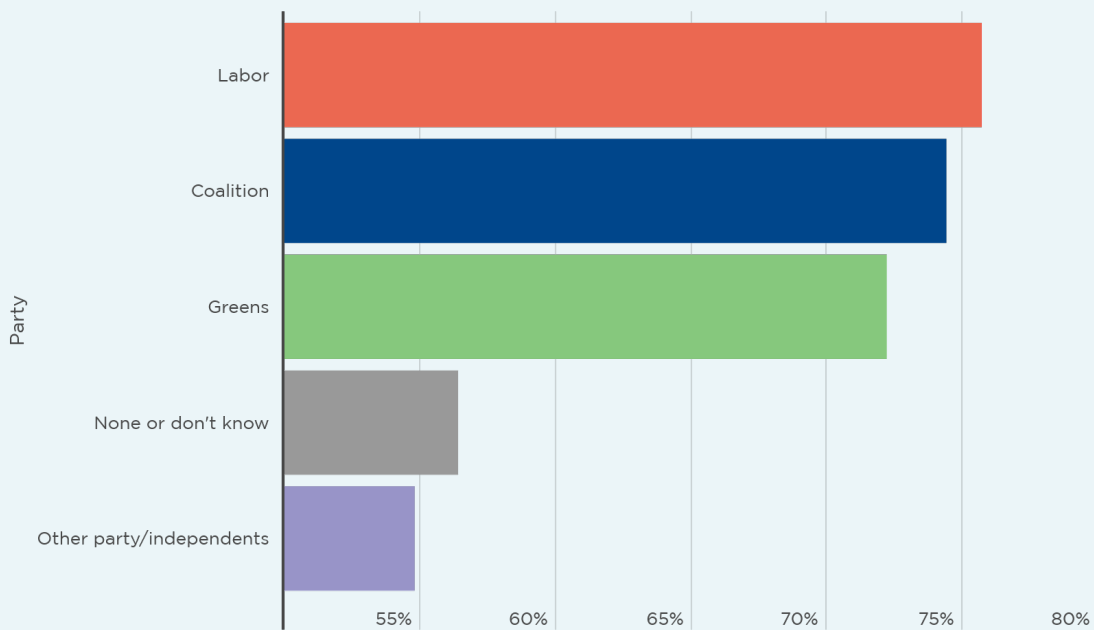


Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employees (N=1635). Survey question: "Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?" - Strongly support /Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don't know/Refuse to answer. The horizontal axis indicates the weighted proportions (%) of employees who answer "Strongly support" or "Somewhat support". Other industries includes the industries "agriculture, forestry and fishing", "mining", "information media and telecommunication", "administrative and support services", "other services", "unknown industry."

5 There is no ‘partisan divide’ in support for a vaccine mandate, although supporters of minor parties and independents, as well as uncommitted voters, are considerably less supportive

Figure 7 shows similarly high levels of support for a vaccine mandate among Labor, Coalition and Greens voters. Employees not aligned with a major party have considerably lower rates of support, perhaps reflecting less trust in mainstream institutions.

Figure 7: Employee support for a vaccine mandate, by voting intention



Notes: Data from waves 39, 40 and 41 of the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey. The sample under study is composed of employed people excluding self-employed (N=1635). Survey question: “Once everyone has had a chance to get vaccinated against COVID-19, would you support your employer making vaccination a requirement of all its employees?” - Strongly support/Somewhat support/Neutral/Somewhat do not support/Strongly do not support/Don't know/Refuse to answer. The horizontal axis indicates the weighted proportions (%) of employees who answer “Strongly support” or “Somewhat support”. Coalition aggregates Liberals and Nationals, other party includes Australian democrats and Independents/other/One Nation.

What this means for the road to COVID normal

There is quite high support among employees for their own employers to mandate vaccination and, perhaps more importantly, few employees are strongly opposed to such a mandate. Government or employer vaccine mandates are therefore likely to be reasonably popular, effective and involve minimal loss of workers. The Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) has outlined that there are three cases in which employers are permitted to require vaccinations (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2021):

- When a state or territory public health order imposes workers to be vaccinated.
- When an enterprise agreement or employment contract allows employers to require vaccination.
- When it is “lawful and reasonable” for employers to ask for vaccination. For FWO the meaning of reasonable is when employees need to interact with people that have a high risk of being infected or with vulnerable people. In areas where there is community transmission employers can also mandate vaccination if workers need to interact with the public.

The FWO interpretation of employer rights to impose vaccine mandates creates considerable ambiguity about when an employer can legally impose such a mandate. Given the broad public health benefits of such mandates, there is a strong case for state and federal government legislative measures to give employers greater certainty about the legality of mandates, and indeed make such mandates broadly permissible.

On mandatory testing of employees, there is slightly weaker support, perhaps because of the ongoing imposition on employees that this entails. It could also be because some employees see it as unnecessary in their workplace, particularly if there is a vaccine mandate in place. That said, only 7 per cent of employees who support a vaccine mandate do not support a testing mandate.

Finally, we note that, while support for the two measures is high, a significant proportion of employees are either neutral or not supportive. Indeed, considerably more employees are willing to be vaccinated (only 7% were unwilling in the period we examine) than are supportive of worker mandates. Universal mandates on all workers may therefore not be viewed as appropriate. In particular, the weaker support for mandatory regular testing suggests that it is perhaps best applied more selectively than vaccine mandates – mainly focusing on workers interacting with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled, sick and children too young to be vaccinated.

Further Information

Datasets:

The analysis uses data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation – Melbourne Institute’s survey of the impact of COVID-19. The aim of the weekly survey is to track changes in the economic and social wellbeing of Australians living through the effects of the coronavirus pandemic whilst adapting to various changes in federal and state government policies. Each wave of the survey contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. The current analysis draws on survey responses collected from waves 39 to 41 between 16 August and 23 September 2021 for the subsample of respondents who are employees (comprising 1,635 respondents).

Authors

Professor Roger Wilkins
Dr Federico Zilio

Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne

Research Insights produced by the Melbourne Institute provide a clear and practical understanding of contemporary economic and social issues in Australia.

Supported by high-quality academic analysis, each Research Insight aims to make sense of complex issues to enable evidence-based decision making for policy

melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au

References:

Australian Government. National Plan to transition Australia’s National COVID-19 Response. Media statement 6 August 2021. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-statement-11>

Dinnes, Jacqueline, Jonathan J. Deeks, Sarah Berhane, Melissa Taylor, Ada Adriano, Clare Davenport, Sabine Ditttrich et al. “Rapid, point-of-care antigen and molecular-based tests for diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection.” *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 3 (2021).

Fair Work Ombudsman. COVID-19 vaccinations: workplace rights and obligations. 6 April 2021; updated 11 October 2021 <https://coronavirus.fairwork.gov.au/coronavirus-and-australian-workplace-laws/covid-19-vaccinations-and-the-workplace/covid-19-vaccinations-workplace-rights-and-obligations>

Lee, Jonghoo, Jae-Uk Song, and Sung Ryul Shim. “Comparing the diagnostic accuracy of rapid antigen detection tests to real time polymerase chain reaction in the diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection: A systematic review and meta-analysis.” *Journal of Clinical Virology* (2021): 104985.

This Research Insight represents the opinions of the author(s) and is not intended to represent the views of the Melbourne Institute. Whilst reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, the author is responsible for any remaining errors and omissions.