Infection Control, Transport Workers, and the Supply Chain

Report

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Executive Summary

Background

The Transport Education Audit Health Compliance Organisation Ltd. (TEACHO) commissioned a research study in November 2022 focusing on infection transmission within the transport industry, along with an assessment of the impact of movement restrictions, including border closures. In response the Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), University of New South Wales (UNSW), with a team of experts from UNSW and Sydney University, undertook a multi-stage research project investigating the risks, transmission dynamics, training solutions, and implications for the transport industry, specifically:

- Potential exposure to COVID-19 (ongoing variants) and future pandemics among transport logistics workforce and supply chains, including training, to mitigate and minimise infection.
- Impact of border closures and movement restrictions on infection control including the supply chain and related worker exposure, and recommendations for effectiveness and efficiency of these measures in the Australian context.
- Employment related risks factors and exposures related to varying work arrangements across the industry.
- Effectiveness of existing company specific training schemes to inform an industry wide training template, training standards, and accreditation.

The research aimed to provide valuable insights and evidence-based recommendations for the implementation of robust infection control within the transport industry. The findings of the study will contribute to enhanced safety, better risk management, and improved pandemic preparedness for the transportation industry and the broader community.

Method

A mixed methods approach was taken to conduct the study, which included: conducting a scoping review of the international literature, auditing publicly available training programs, and interviews with key stakeholders.

Results

This study demonstrates the vulnerability to and consequences of respiratory pandemics like COVID-19 for the transport industry globally and locally. The study reinforces the core role played by the transport industry in keeping economies moving in the face of massive pandemic disruptions around the globe. Given the nature of the industry, transport workers are placed at the front line of infections. Pandemics like COVID-19 disrupt standard ways of working while changing the role of transport in everyday life.

Here, the results are summarised based upon the three sub-studies conducted to address the aim of the main study:

1. *Potential exposure to COVID-19 and future pandemics among transport workforces.*

A scoping review of the international literature (over 12500 papers) systematically chose and reviewed 39 research articles [1] to understand the impact of respiratory diseases on transport workers and identify evidence-based recommendations to mitigate the risks associated with these diseases in the transport industry. The scoping review (n=39 papers) highlighted the high risk of transport workers' exposure to respiratory diseases during pandemics. The implementation of preventive measures was found to be inadequate, as a high percentage of transport workers were involved in positions that required contact with the public and material moving, thus increasing the risk of infection. Structural inequalities facing the sector contributed to their vulnerability, such as longer working hours, larger geographic coverage, and overcrowded spaces. Systemic inequalities, including socio-economic status, ethnic and racial disparities, led to unemployment during the pandemic and increased mental health challenges especially for vulnerable workers. Financial strain experienced during lockdowns led to increased risk of detrimental behaviours and attitudes towards safety measures. Furthermore, the measures implemented by governments routinely failed to consider the complexities of the transport industry, impacting negatively on the workforce, which in turn risked the effectiveness of the pandemic response. The literature suggested that the transport industry often fell short in fulfilling its responsibility to provide the conditions to support staff, particularly those who were vulnerable, to curb the transmission of infections during the COVID-19 pandemic. This deficiency was notably evident in the absence of comprehensive contingency plans, dedicated resources and the necessary conditions for safeguarding the health and safety of transport workers and the public.

2. *Quality of existing infection prevention and control training programs for transport workers.*
An analysis of 200 out of 641 Registered Training Organizations (RTO) websites was undertaken. The findings revealed that only 4 RTOs provide information about delivering training programs on infection prevention and control module tailored specifically for transport workers. However, access to the course materials for these programs was not publicly available. These findings underscore the need for greater accessibility and transparency in delivering essential infection control training for the transport sector.

3. *Effectiveness of infection prevention and control measures in the Australian transport industry.*
Three interviews were conducted with staff working within senior management. Participants reported that the transport industry strictly adhered to infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, but the lack of preparation made implementation difficult. The provision of infection control training to transportation workers was undertaken in response to pressing and urgent demand arising from the pandemic; however, its execution was delayed. The pandemic led to a

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[1] https://osf.io/nsey8

workforce shortage in the sector which has failed to recover following the pandemic. Participants expressed that the extensive efforts, extra paperwork, and management time invested in dealing with border control challenged an already stretched industry. Proactive engagement with industry became the fundamental mechanism to ensure the effectiveness of the response and to minimise negative impacts for the industry and community.

Overall, our findings show that a pandemic response that is blanket across society and not tailored to the realities of specific critical industries like transport, is insufficient. That heavy handed response risks infection breakouts due to lack of compliance and clarity in the sector about what is required, with added burdens of stress, burnout and job losses due to industry disruptions. The finding that training was not required uniformly across the sector supports the evidence that heavy handed policy responses are limited in scope to preventing and address pandemics like COVID-19. Future proofing pandemics, through system wide infection control training tailored to the transport workforce, is urgently needed. Preliminary industry leader interviews supported these overall findings while adding that effective engagement between pandemic policy makers and the transport sector facilitates a more effective response and adherence from the sector.

Recommendations

1. Tailor infection control activities, including pandemic prevention, to the different modes of activity across the transport sector.

2. Industry to recognise potential vulnerabilities amongst the workforce in terms of risks of infection and response to interventions, and to maximise a supportive environment for all workers.

3. Provide ongoing education and training programs that ensure consistent and adequate adherence to infection prevention and control measures, even during non-pandemic periods.

4. Mandate comprehensive training programs for transport workers on infection control, like personal protective equipment (PPE) usage, and hygiene practices.

5. Collaborate with government agencies to create stockpiles of essential supplies, including PPE and sanitization equipment, strategically located across transport networks.

6. Develop and deliver targeted interventions, communication and assistance for vulnerable transport workers who have underlying health issues that mean greater susceptibility to infectious diseases transmission.

7. Engage transport sector leaders in sector leaders in pandemic focussed planning and decision-making, actively seek their input, fostering ownership and cultivating a sense of responsibility.

8. Implement routine health monitoring and testing for transport workers, enabling early detection and containment of potential outbreaks.

9. The transport industry advocate for the development and implementation of clear and consistent infection prevention and control measures for borders throughout Australia to the federal government.

10. TEACHO should actively collaborate with stakeholders including employers, unions, regulatory bodies, and health authorities, to share best practices for enhanced compliance and unified infection control.

Contents

Background

The Transport Education Audit Health Compliance Organisation Ltd. (TEACHO) commissioned a study in November 2022 focusing on infection transmission within the transport industry, along with an assessment of the impact of movement restrictions, including border closures, on workers. In response the Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), University of New South Wales (UNSW), with experts from UNSW and Sydney University, undertook a study to provide comprehensive evidence pertaining to the risks, transmission dynamics, training solutions, and implications for the transport industry, encompassing logistics workforce and supply chains.

The research primarily focused on the potential exposure of transport workers to respiratory diseases during a pandemic. It evaluated existing measures aimed at mitigating and minimizing infections among transport workers. Furthermore, the study analysed work-related risk factors and exposures associated with various work arrangements across the transport industry. Recognizing that the protection against infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, is only as strong as the weakest link, the research also shone light on the vulnerabilities faced by workers within the industry that may have led to heightened risks of infection and negative impacts from the pandemic response.

An essential component of the study was assessing the availability of existing training schemes. The goal was to identify best practices and insights that could inform the development of an industry-wide training template, training standards, and accreditation.

The study also examined the impact of border closures and movement restrictions on infection control, encompassing both the supply chain and the exposure risks faced by workers.

By delving into these dynamics, the research aimed to provide valuable insights and evidence-based recommendations for the implementation of robust infection prevention and control within the transport industry. The findings are intended to contribute to enhanced safety, better risk management, and improved pandemic preparedness for the transportation industry and the broader community.

Methods

Three interrelated studies were planned to be conducted to systematically provide evidence covering, broadly, who is at risk, why and how transmission occurs, training as a solution, and implications and recommendations for industry wide policy, and regulation. Each successive study would build upon the findings of the previous one.

1. Study one: Scoping review of transport workforce risk and exposure to COVID-19 and other related respiratory infections.
2. Study two: Comparative review of infection prevention and control training programs delivered to transport workers in Australia.
3. Study three: The impact of infection prevention and control measures in the Australian transport industry.

Table 1: Data Collection

Type	Data Source	Methods and data	Purpose/rationale
Secondary	Publicly available literature	Scoping review approach	• Comprehensive and systematic examination of the existing literature. • Map the main sources of evidence, and gaps in the literature.
Secondary	Publicly available online training programs	Audit the training programs based on key elements of infection prevention and control.	• Quality assurance. • Compliance verification. • Continuous improvement. • Improve stakeholder confidence. • Risk identification and mitigation.
Primary	Interviews with other key stakeholders e.g., Director of a Transport company	Semi-structured interviews of up to 1 hour with key stakeholders.	• Describe the impact of infection control measures on the transport industry.

Results

Scoping review

A comprehensive search was conducted of English-language databases for peer-reviewed research articles. We reviewed research articles published internationally in the last 20 years (2002 – 2022). A three-step screening process was used to ensure that the selected studies met the inclusion criteria and were relevant to the research question (See Box 1):
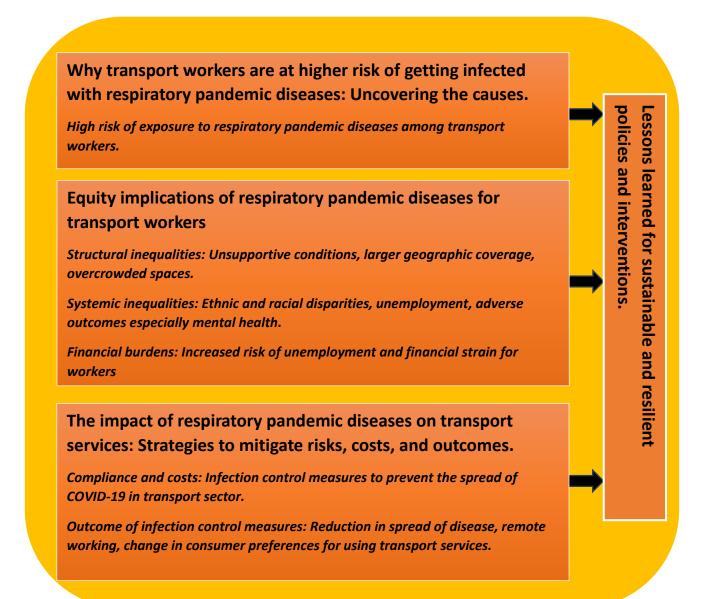
> **Box 1: Research questions**
>
> 1) What is known from the literature about the reasons for and factors surrounding transport workers getting infected with pandemic respiratory diseases?
> 2) What are the equity implications of respiratory diseases for diverse groups of transport workers?
> 3) What is the impact of respiratory diseases on those who use transport services directly or indirectly, considering the globally and locally documented measures employed by governments and transport industries?

We found 12540 relevant articles of which 39 were retained [2]. All the 39 research articles included in the scoping review were focussed on COVID-19.

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[2] https://osf.io/nsey8

The results were summarised under four themes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Themes identified from the selected 39 research articles.

Why transport workers are at higher risk of getting infected with respiratory pandemic diseases: Uncovering the causes.

High risk of exposure to respiratory pandemic diseases among transport workers.

Equity implications of respiratory pandemic diseases for transport workers

Structural inequalities: Unsupportive conditions, larger geographic coverage, overcrowded spaces.

Systemic inequalities: Ethnic and racial disparities, unemployment, adverse outcomes especially mental health.

Financial burdens: Increased risk of unemployment and financial strain for workers

The impact of respiratory pandemic diseases on transport services: Strategies to mitigate risks, costs, and outcomes.

Compliance and costs: Infection control measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in transport sector.

Outcome of infection control measures: Reduction in spread of disease, remote working, change in consumer preferences for using transport services.

Lessons learned for sustainable and resilient policies and interventions.

Theme One: Why transport workers are at higher risk of becoming infected with respiratory pandemic diseases Uncovering the causes.

The literature reported that transport workers faced heightened risk of exposure to respiratory pandemic diseases resulting in an increase in mortality rate. As an example, an observational study about COVID-19 outbreaks and mortality among public transportation workers in California reported the cumulative outbreak incidence for all public transportation industries was 1.4 times as high as that for all industries, and the cumulative crude mortality rate for all public transportation industries was 174 per 100,000 workers, which was 1.5 times as high as the rate across all industries [1].

The implementation of preventive measures, such as the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and passenger restrictions, was a crucial step towards mitigating the risk of respiratory pandemic diseases among transport workers. However, these measures were found to be inadequate because of various reasons including the working conditions of the transport workers (See Box 2).

Box 2: Reasons for transport workers' higher risk of exposure

- Close contact.
- Crowded environments.
- Prolonged exposure in some cases
- Accumulated fatigue.
- Inadequate preventive measures.
- Poor adherence to preventive measures.
- Underlying health conditions including hypertension, type 2 diabetes, sleep apnoea, high cholesterol.
- Varied sources of information

Theme Two: Equity implications of respiratory pandemic diseases for transport workers.

The reviewed literature emphasised the core role played by the transport industry in keeping economies moving in the face of massive pandemic disruptions around the globe. The nature of the industry meant greater exposure for all workers to infection and the interventions put into place during the pandemic. The literature also identified equity implications of respiratory diseases like COVID-19 for diverse groups of transport workers that were both structural and systemic (See Box 3 and Box 4).

Box 3	Box 4
Structural inequities:	**Systemic inequities:**
• Unsupportive working conditions such as longer hours.	• Higher rates of unemployment observed compared to non-transportation industries groups.
• Larger geographic coverage.	• Minority groups, such as females, non-White or Hispanic and non-citizens, were disproportionately more affected, especially concerning mental health.
• Limited time and resources to prioritize their own well-being.	
• Inability to avoid crowded spaces.	
• Challenge in accessing medical care.	• Education shown to matter.

The financial situation of transport workers played a significant role in shaping their health and safety. Those who suffered substantial income loss during the lockdown exhibited mental health challenges and behaviours that risked the effectiveness of safety measures. However, some transport workers were reported as showing a higher tendency to wear face shields included those who were the sole source of household income, or lived with older adults, or who were at higher risk of Covid-19 complications.

Moreover, profound impacts on gig workers were reported, especially those with lower incomes who were less likely to transition to remote working. Other behavioural challenges were also documented such as increased smoking rates.

Theme Three: The Impact of respiratory pandemic diseases on transport services: Strategies to mitigate risks, costs, and outcomes.

According to the literature various infection control measures were implemented to prevent the spread of respiratory pandemic diseases including:

- Lockdowns.

- Use of personal protective equipment.

- Social distancing.

- Temperature screening.

- Staff redistribution.

- Suspending ticket checking.

- Enhancing work flexibility.

There was debate on the extent to which these infection control measures have been effective in controlling the virus's transmission. Most of studies included in this review suggested that while measures helped to reduce the spread of pandemic infectious diseases they also resulted in:

- Reduced vehicle capacity and increased waiting times for passengers.
- Reduced passenger capacity during the pandemic resulted in a disproportionate impact on certain groups, such as low-income communities and essential workers who relied on public transport.
- Use of technology reduce the need for travel, particularly in urban areas.
- Decrease in demand for certain transport services, such as public transport and ride-hailing services, among individuals working from home, while simultaneously leading to an increase in demand for delivery services.
- Limiting demand resulting in broader economic impacts on the transport industry, particularly airlines, with many companies facing bankruptcy and staff lay-offs.
- Increased car dependence, changes in public transport, walking and cycling patterns.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, truck drivers faced increasing challenges finding adequate parking at truck stops and rest areas. This scarcity of parking spaces not only disrupted their regular rest schedules but also contributed to heightened levels of fatigue among these essential workers as well as strategies to combat fatigue like consuming large amounts of caffeinated products.

Theme Four: Lessons learned for sustainable and resilient policies and interventions.

The studies included in this scoping review provided recommendations for reassessing and analysing current transport systems and policy governance, considering both pandemic and non-pandemic situations (See Box 5).

Audit of online training programs

Registered Training Organizations (RTOs) authorized to deliver Infection Control Skill Set (Transport and Logistics) training using Skill Set HLTSS00067 were audited. An analysis of 200 out of 641 RTO websites was undertaken. The findings revealed that only 4 RTOs provided information about delivering training programs on infection prevention and control tailored specifically for transport workers. However, access to the course materials for these programs was not publicly available. These findings underscore the need for greater accessibility and transparency in delivering essential infection control training for the transport sector.

This study entailed a comprehensive audit of nine training programs provided by TEACHO. To facilitate this assessment, the research team developed and applied a robust audit tool, to each program. Among the nine audited, four training programs were specifically tailored for transport workers. However, we discovered that only two of these programs were publicly accessible. These two training initiatives resulted from a collaborative effort between the organisation delivering the training and the Queensland Trucking Association. Upon completion, attendees were awarded certificates. Notably, both training programs were released in 2020.

During our analysis, we found that utilized multimedia content such as videos and quizzes were used to keep learners involved. Regular assessments throughout the training and immediate feedback helped gauge understanding and reinforce learning. However, information on the qualifications and experience of the trainers was not included, nor did the content of the programs focus significantly on adult learning principles as recommended by best practice training approaches. The training should incorporate real-world scenarios specific to the transportation industry, helping workers understand how infection control practices apply to their daily tasks and interactions. Moreover, there was a lack of information on the evaluation of training program quality and the recommended frequency of attending training sessions. Further improvements could be made to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of the training programs for transport workers (See Box 6).

Box 6

- Embrace adult learning principles.
- Develop a robust system to assess the quality of training programs.
- Periodic refresher courses to address evolving challenges and best practices.
- Employing industry-specific examples and scenarios allowing transport workers to grasp infection control concepts within the context of their own work environments and responsibilities.
- Mandatory attendance fostering a culture of responsibility and preparedness within the industry.
- Include practical demonstrations and hands-on sessions.
- Recognize and reward workers who complete the training.

Interviews

Three interviews were conducted with the top management of the transportation industry.

About implementation of infection presentation and control measures.

Participants had varying responses when it came to the implementation of infection control practices among transport workers. There were challenges and frustrations due to the lack of preparation in developing and implementing these measures. However, one participant reported positive experiences with well-implemented COVID-19 measures and advocacy efforts to ensure compliance among transport workers.

We did an enormous amount of work during COVID. From advocacy in particular,
to try and shape government policy so that it was pragmatic and practical for the

industry to implement. We did end up with, I think, some quite unique characteristics to the way Queensland approached it.

Infection presentation and control measures adherence

Participants reported that the transport industry demonstrated strict adherence to infection control measures during the study period. These measures were described as very stringent and aimed at ensuring the safety and well-being of workers and passengers. Adhering to infection control measures required significant efforts in coordination and management. Transport industry personnel invested heavily in time and resources to ensure that the processes were effectively controlled and executed. However, the participants noted that the overall response from workers, management, and relevant stakeholders was positive and cooperative.

they responded very, very well overall, in extreme adversity, with very, very little support, particularly in the early days.

Participants reported the industry's overall adherence to infection control measures. Some instances of non-compliance were pointed out amongst some small numbers of individuals or groups, although this was explained as typical for any industry.

There was still plenty of mistakes. There was still some nonconformance.

Infection control training

Participants reported that infection control training for transport workers was provided, given the urgent need during the pandemic. The training provided to transport workers was conducted online, making it accessible and more convenient for participants given the risks of face-to-face learning. The digital format also allowed for widespread dissemination of essential information. The content of the training program was described by participants as a basic government infection control course. It covered fundamental principles and guidelines to equip transport workers with essential knowledge. While the infection control training was deemed essential, participants noted that its launch was delayed. The timing of the training initiation occurred later than anticipated.

We had a talkfest of exactly that, "Yes, the government will supply training." It ended up being launched, no lie, four to five months after the thing. It missed the boat. The ship had left the port.

Shortage of transport workers during COVID-19

Participants expressed concern that there was shortage of transport workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant revealed that their operations in Western Australia had to come to a halt due to a significant labour shortage, which remained after the pandemic.

> *it's interesting that the labour shortage post pandemic is a lot worse than it was pre-pandemic.*

Participants mentioned that a significant factor contributing to the shortage of transport workers was the impact of COVID-19 on the industry. Many people chose to leave the transport sector during the pandemic, with participants attributing their departure directly to the effects of COVID-19 on work conditions and job security. Transport workers felt that they could find better-paying opportunities elsewhere, leading them to opt out of the transport sector. Participants highlighted the disappearance of overtime opportunities during COVID-19, which had a direct impact on transport workers income. With reduced overtime, many transport workers faced financial constraints, leading some to seek alternative employment.

> *Because they still got paid, but they were not getting their extra 15, 20 hours a week of overtime. It makes a big difference in your pay packet.*

Border control and the supply chain

Participants described experiences with border control and maintaining the supply chain as very challenging. The process was arduous and posed significant obstacles for smooth transportation. Of particular concern was that measures failed to understand the already financial precarity of the sector, which runs on 'very fine margins'. The pandemic response risked those fine margins and had ongoing ramifications for the workforce – especially mental health - and sector – especially staff recruitment and retention. Border controls presented uncertainties and delays. Participants highlighted the toll taken on both resources and personnel, expressing limited tangible benefits gained from the efforts expended in dealing with varying and inconsistent border control challenges across the country. One participant suggested:

> *And, in my view, it was to no avail. It didn't achieve anything. If they're going to put some guidelines in, let's do it as one country, not five.*

Participants expressed that the extensive efforts, extra paperwork, and management time invested in dealing with border control achieved minimal returns. The challenges outweighed the benefits.

Support for handling of the pandemic, with caveats

Participants commended Australia for its overall effective handling of the pandemic compared to the rest of the world. However, participants suggested that control measures by the government could have been managed better.

> *We could have done a lot better if there was a coordinated approach towards what processes and procedures we should follow rather than this knee-jerk reaction by state governments, which is what occurred.*

Another participant felt the sector was capable of positively responding if the advice was clear.

> *Tell us what needs to be done, tell us what the rules are, and we'll get it done… I run my own business, when you're making that, you have to make decisions very quickly… So, behind the scenes, call it the operationalizing, was very well done, by the organizations, by their own osmosis.*

During interviews a difference between jurisdictions became apparent. The industry leader in that jurisdiction reported being more actively engaged in the day to day running of the pandemic response. That engagement enabled the individual to feed information into government decision making, proactively. The active involvement of the industry in this way, was described as an important part of the response, explained as allowing better decision making to occur in terms of understanding what risks were appearing in the sector and in the community. That relationship took time and skill, as well as prior experience of that individual with the workings of government.

Participants expressed that there remains room for improvement in infection control especially development and delivery of adequate training for transport workers. They believed that being well-prepared with standardized industry wide training templates would enable a swift response to any future challenges.

> *From a training point of view, I've thought about this. We've learned so much out of this. There is no reason, why we couldn't have some genuine templates, we've learnt so much.*

Conclusion

The insights from this project hold pivotal value in ensuring the transport industry's effectiveness and safety during future critical periods. Across three stages, focussing on three different sources of data, this research has revealed the important role played by the transport industry during the COVID-19 pandemic while highlighting the concerning absence of comprehensive system-wide training. Industry leaders' interviews suggested that the industry was able to respond and adapt effectively to what was required but that

response occurred under challenging circumstances, often marked by unclear information and incongruent goals. Robust communication channels and partnerships between industry stakeholders bolstered industry preparedness and overall resilience, as well as potentially positively influencing the response itself. Establishing positive relationships and transparent communication between the industry and policy makers is essential to ensure compliance. At the same time, the literature demonstrated the potential impact of unsupportive working conditions during the pandemic, especially for vulnerable workforce such as women, those on lower incomes or those from diverse racial backgrounds. Our audit of industry training revealed limited availability of a coordinated and system wide training response across the sector. That finding underscores the imperative for targeted investment in tailored training programs to equip transport workers in the face of pandemic challenges. Transport workers can better grasp infectious control measures by receiving training that matches their tasks and exposure risks. Training programs could be tailored to the roles and responsibilities of different types of transport workers, considering factors like types or modes of transport jobs, passenger and cargo interactions, and workplace infection control measures.

Recommendations

1. Tailor infection control activities, including pandemic prevention, to the different modes of activity across the transport sector.
2. Industry to recognise potential vulnerabilities amongst the workforce in terms of risks of infection and response to interventions, and to maximise supportive conditions for all workers.
3. Provide ongoing education and training programs that ensure consistent and adequate adherence to infection prevention and control measures, even during non-pandemic periods.
4. Mandate comprehensive training programs for transport workers on infection control, like personal protective equipment (PPE) usage, and hygiene practices.
5. Collaborate with government agencies to create stockpiles of essential supplies, including PPE and sanitization equipment, strategically located across transport networks.
6. Develop and deliver targeted interventions, communication and assistance for vulnerable transport workers who have underlying health issues that mean greater susceptibility to infectious diseases transmission.
7. Engage transport sector leaders in pandemic focussed planning and decision-making, actively seek their input, fostering ownership and cultivating a sense of responsibility.
8. Implement routine health monitoring and testing for transport workers, enabling early detection and containment of potential outbreaks.
9. The transport industry advocate for the development and implementation of clear and consistent infection prevention and control measures for borders throughout Australia to the federal government.
10. TEACHO should actively collaborate with stakeholders including employers, unions, regulatory bodies, and health authorities, to share best practices for enhanced compliance and unified infection control.

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