



Orthopaedic surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic

Australian Orthopaedic Association

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The Australian Orthopaedic Association (AOA) calls for all urgent and essential orthopaedic surgery to be preserved at its present level during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent future physical disability in the Australian population.

President of the Australian Orthopaedic Association Dr Andrew Ellis said, “While all non-urgent and lower-priority surgery must be suspended in all hospitals until such time as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Australian health system are fully known. Arrangements to preserve urgent and essential orthopaedic surgery must be actioned immediately in order to prevent long-term physical disability of those Australians most in need.”

Urgent and essential surgery is time-critical surgery in which a known or expected significant deterioration in life or limb function will occur within hours, days or weeks.

“Examples of urgent and essential surgery include acute fracture and dislocation surgery, major trauma surgery, urgent spinal surgery and surgery required for intractable, severe pain. Reconstructive surgery and elective joint replacement surgery that may be performed at a later and safer time are not examples of urgent and essential surgery.

“Orthopaedic surgeons are the key decision makers, in conjunction with their patients, in this process. A process should exist in every local area and hospital, by which senior peers or heads of orthopaedic departments provide expert guidance in decision-making. This is particularly the case where ambiguity exists in non-emergency cases. It is recognised at this time that there is some regional variation, and in rare circumstances capacity exists for minor modification of this recommendation – in the very short term,” Dr Ellis said.

AOAs position regarding essential and urgent surgery has been made with the health and wellbeing of staff and patients top of mind. Importantly, AOAs position regarding orthopaedic surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic is one that prioritises the resources of the Australian health system and the orthopaedic, anaesthetic and nursing workforce who are on the frontline in managing the urgent and emergency needs of the community.

Editor note

Orthopaedic surgery involves operating on bones, joints and the musculoskeletal system for the treatment of injuries, arthritis and other conditions.

These conditions range from acute emergencies and trauma needing rapid treatment to those requiring reconstructive procedures that may be performed in a less time-critical way in months to years after their onset.

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