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Victoria orders 2.2m rapid tests and mulls local manufacture

Patrick Durkin *BOSS Deputy editor*



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The Victorian government is in talks to fund local manufacture of rapid COVID-19 tests, as state and federal governments belatedly embrace the tool to reopen schools and offices, and allow major events to resume.

The Victoria Racing Club hopes the state government will clear the way for a crowd of 11,500 at the Melbourne Cup on November 2 – even if it comes days before the state reaches 80 per cent of adults fully vaccinated on November 6 – so the race can be the first major event after the delta lockdown.

Victoria [reported 1638 new local COVID-19 cases and two deaths on Thursday](#), as health officials revealed 43 per cent of active cases were in Melbourne's north. Outbreaks have occurred at 10 abattoirs and meatworks, with more than 30 cases confirmed.



The Victoria Racing Club hopes the state government will clear the way for a crowd of 11,500 at the Melbourne Cup. **Getty**

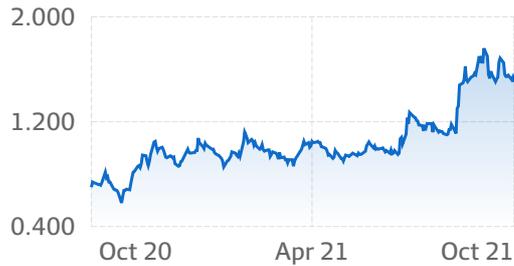
Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley said the government will purchase almost 2.2 million rapid antigen tests to expand trials involving 1200 employees, who are being tested three times a week as they work on a level crossing removal project and in the emergency department at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

The move follows federal Health Minister Greg Hunt announcing Australians will be able to test themselves for COVID-19 at home from November, once the national medical regulator approves the method.

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NSW has also announced plans to begin rapid antigen testing at schools and “key worksites” to check for COVID-19 cases within 20 minutes.

The United States announced on Wednesday it would spend \$US1 billion (\$1.4 billion) to buy and subsidise rapid tests to provide 200 million tests to manage the return to work.

Australia has come late to rapid antigen testing as a tool to aid reopening and is now playing catch-up.

Qantas, Coles push for tests

Major companies including Qantas, Coles, Woolworths and Pacific National have led the way in pushing for the use of such tests.

The CEO of listed medical device company Atomo, John Kelly, said rapid testing would be key not just to reopening schools but for offices and major events such as racing, cricket and tennis, with their test taking just 10 minutes.

“It’s useful to look at overseas markets which are six to nine months ahead of us, Mr Kelly told *The Australian Financial Review*. “In the UK you are expected to show vaccine certificates and show negative test results to watch major events like Premier football, get into theatres and restaurants and schools.”

The Victoria Racing Club has submitted a proposal for a crowd of 11,500 a day on each of the four major days of the Spring Racing Carnival. They have advised their members pre-event testing or vaccine certificates are being considered by the state government.

Australian Open

It is expected a double vaccination requirement would be imposed on the Cup crowd but rapid testing may not be employed until later events like the Australian Open. Tennis stars are also expected to face a vaccine mandate, despite world No. 1 and nine-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic being among the vaccine-hesitant. The WTA estimated last month 60 per cent of its players were vaccinated.

Mr Kelly said the amount invested in rapid tests across the US and Europe showed that state and federal governments had a long way to go to catch up but talks were underway to scale up local manufacturing.

“We have expressed interest to both federal and state governments around the ability to scale up and expand our capacity,” he said.

“We’ve said to the Australian governments the manufacturing could be done locally.

“We’ve had a lot of interest from the Victorian government and the more the

pandemic expands the more the need for an on-shore manufacturing capability become obvious.”

Brisbane-based biotech firm Ellume has also been a beneficiary of the push, winning a US Department of Defence contract worth \$US230 million to ramp up production of its COVID-19 home test kits earlier this year.

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Patrick Durkin is Melbourne bureau chief and BOSS deputy editor. He writes on news, business and leadership. *Connect with Patrick on [Twitter](#). Email Patrick at pdurkin@afr.com*

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