



Australian
Chamber of Commerce
and Industry

TRANSCRIPT

Event: Andrew McKellar interview with Oliver Peterson, Perth Live, 6PR.

Speakers: Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Oliver Peterson, Perth Live, 6PR.

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E&OE

Oliver Peterson, host Perth Live 6PR: Unions across Australia are now calling for employers to go and cover the cost of these RATs. And if they don't, they're threatening industrial action. Dozens of unions met yesterday to consider a response to isolation requirements for work in critical industries that they fear will put employees at risk and accelerate the spread of the Omicron variant. On the line is the chief executive officer of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Andrew McKellar. Good afternoon.

Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry: Hello, Oly.

Oliver: Thanks for your time there, Andrew. Obviously, we are living in different worlds at the moment without the spread of Omicron, but that'll all change come February 5. Should it be up to the individual businesses now to purchase these RATs?

Andrew: Look, I think here, the important thing to bear in mind is that this is a public health issue, and it's also about the economy. At the moment, businesses are facing really a triple whammy. We are seeing, in many places, acute supply chains issues. We're seeing great difficulties in maintaining labour force. We've got consumers, pulling back as they face the uncertainty of this Omicron situation. In those circumstances, many businesses are struggling

for cash flow. So to expect that particularly small and medium size businesses in that environment, are going to be able to manage the quite significant costs that can come with trying to maintain this capability, to get access to these tests, and to pay for them, I think that's really not safe. It's not realistic. The tests should be made freely and widely available. There is a role for government here to play because it's a public health issue.

Oliver: So basically, unions and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry are on the same page saying it should be government paying, but there's a bit of finger pointing going on. Sally McManus from the ACTU says if employers cannot provide a safe workplace for staff, then unions have set out that industrial action would become an appropriate response, Andrew.

Andrew: No, I really think that is an absolute last resort and I think it's quite unfair as well in the sense that employers, business, is very mindful of its responsibilities in terms of workplace health and safety. They do want to play their part. And one of the tools that they want access to where it's appropriate is to be able to get these test kits. I think here, we've got to all pull together. I think there's a role for businesses to play, there's a role for the unions, and there's a role for government. And here, we've got to protect not only the health of the community, but we've also got to protect the health of the economy. They're two things that got to go hand in hand.

Oliver: There is obviously supply issues at the moment, well documented throughout the summer, Andrew. Should they ease in the next couple of weeks?

Andrew: It's very hard to know. At the moment, there are real pressure points. And as long as we have the compounding factor with Omicron surging with high number of cases in the community, still high close contacts, that's going to place pressure on the labour market. We've got continuing supply chain issues. So look, we're not out of the woods yet. I think if we can get back to the situation where we were not long before Christmas, then there was a great deal of optimism at that point in time, it's taken a bit of a pummelling, but those pressure points were already there before we got hit by this latest surge.

Oliver: Well, you just heard in Perth Live's 'Word on the Street' from Kate there, 20 bucks for one test in Perth at the moment. You're hearing all those horror stories across the country. Andrew, I know that the ACCC is looking at what it can do to make sure nobody is being gouged, but that would at least be that the first port of call, that no one, whether that's a business or an individual, is having to pay up and above what they should be if they can get their hands on a RAT.

Andrew: Absolutely, and from a business point of view, we welcome the ACCC's involvement here. We welcome their vigilance. But ultimately, the only thing that's going to help resolve this issue is supply and demand. It's getting the supply of those tests into the marketplace, getting them out to the community, making sure that as kids go to school, we've got adequate supply there, trying to keep businesses running, addressing the demand for essential workers, ensuring that workplaces are safe. We have to have the supply. And that's where we are relying on governments, state and Federal, to get in there and help address those issues and ensure that they can be accessed affordably, as they have been in other parts of the world, in the UK and other countries in Europe, in Singapore, in many parts of North America. Why we should be any different, I'm not sure.

Oliver: Thanks for your time this afternoon, Andrew.

Andrew: Thanks very much.

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