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Vaccinate WA: The Role of Leadership in Rapid Project Delivery

An ANZSOG Teaching Case by Susannah Nichols

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Abstract

In April 2020, three months into the critical phase to plan and mobilise delivery of the new Western Australian Digital Strategy Roadmap, the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic radically shifted priorities for Health Support Services, the health service provider that provides shared services (including ICT) for the Western Australian (WA) public health system. The WA Department of Health played a central role in the State's pandemic response to protect public health. Health Support Services was required to urgently develop a vaccine administration management system (VaccinateWA) to assist in the delivery of the State's COVID-19 immunisation program.

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Delivering Vaccinate WA presented a series of risk considerations to the Health Support Services team tasked with developing the system. These considerations included an extremely time- pressured environment, a high degree of uncertainty and the high-profile nature of the project that attracted strong levels of public scrutiny. This case study will explore the leadership dynamics involved in delivering critical digital infrastructure to support rapid population immunisation against COVID-19, while overcoming a significant risk profile and ensuring the wellbeing of the team tasked with developing VaccinateWA.

Key Lessons

Key lessons can be drawn from this case about the critical role leadership plays in a high performing public sector agency. The case demonstrates that leadership at all levels across an organisation plays a central role in establishing and embedding values and culture within the organisation, enhancing accountability and integrity amongst its staff, and expanding the capacity of teams to mitigate risks and deliver outcomes despite uncertainty.

COVID-19 and the race to deliver a vaccine

In November 2020, in response to the COVID-19 vaccine’s pending arrival for use in the community, the Health Minister for the Australian Federal Government, Greg Hunt, outlined:

The goal and the expectation is that Australians who sought vaccination will be vaccinated within 2021...There are no surprises, health and aged care workers and the elderly and vulnerable will be the first to gain access to a vaccine that’s deemed safe and effective (Haydar & Dalzell, 2020, n.p.).

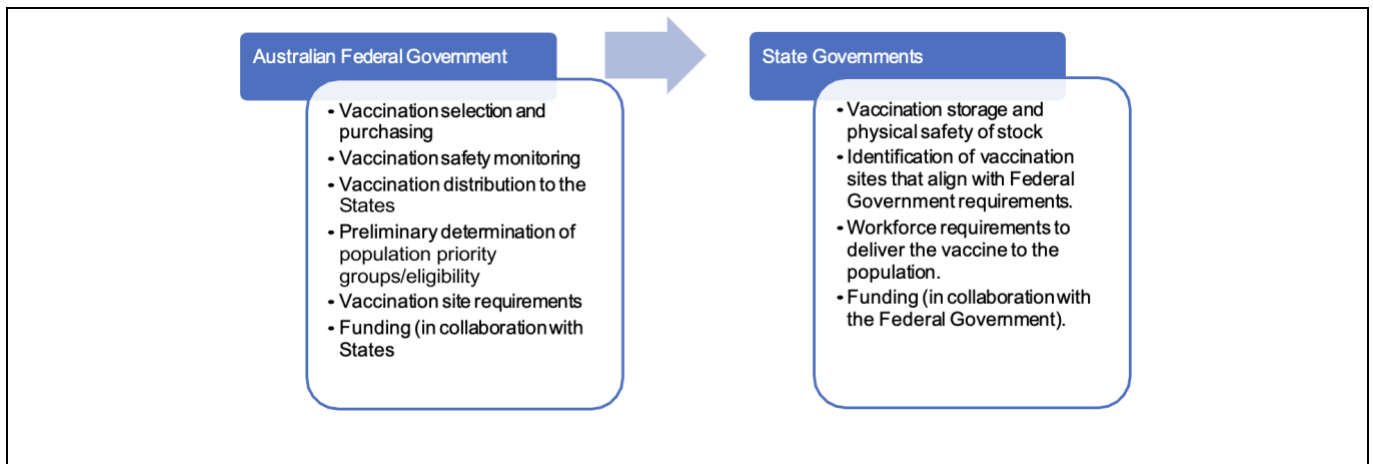
In anticipation of the COVID-19 vaccine arriving in Australia, the Australian Federal Government released the COVID-19 Vaccination Policy. The policy outlined the vaccination requirements and the division of responsibilities between the Federal and State governments for the roll-out of the vaccine across Australia (See Chart One for a breakdown of jurisdictional responsibilities) (Australian Government, 2020, pp. 1, 11).

Consequently, each State Government would be required to develop a system that could deliver the vaccination to their population in alignment with the Federal Government’s vaccine requirements. The Western Australian (WA) Department of Health commissioned Health Support Services to lead the development of a Vaccine Management System. Ralph Bates, Executive Director for the COVID Response within Health Support Services, was tasked with leading his team to urgently develop a vaccine administration management system (VaccinateWA) that could manage the herculean task of vaccinating the WA population before the vaccine arrived in WA.

The new system needed to deliver WA’s COVID-19 immunisation program, which involved the management of scarce vaccination inventory, enabling the public to access vaccination services at scale, operating the growing network of temporary vaccine clinics, and managing vaccine administration. It quickly became apparent that to deliver the system the team assigned the task would need to absorb a demanding workload, overcome an important risk profile, and ensure quality was upheld to achieve a critical outcome for the Western Australian community. Leadership was critical.

Figure 1:

COVID-19 Vaccination - Key areas of responsibility for Federal and State governments in Australia, November 2020



Who was involved in the Western Australian response?

The WA Government had two main actors during its COVID-19 response, Premier Mark McGowan and Minister for Health, Roger Cook. Under pressure to open the WA borders with the rest of Australia, the McGowan government determined vaccination of the population was key to achieving this (Spagnolo, 2021, n.p.). With the proposed start date to begin in early 2021, the McGowan government needed to be prepared to respond to ensure that all Western Australians could be vaccinated (McCubbing, 2020, n.p.). This required a new system that could accommodate and manage a population wide vaccination program.

As an entity within the WA health system, Health Support Services plays a critical role in supporting the delivery of health care in WA. Part of this role includes working with other health service providers (i.e. WA public health services and hospitals) to enhance service delivery for the WA community. This includes the provision of information, communication, and technology; procurement and supply; workforce services (such as payroll and recruitment); financial services; and the delivery of customer-driven programs and projects (See appendix A for an example of how Health Support Services' systems work across the Department) (Health Support Services, 2022).

Driven by its purpose to 'support our customers to provide excellent health care', Health Support Services attributes its values as critical in achieving this. These values included, 'We put our customers at the heart of what we do; We value and care for each other; We promise, we own, we do; We will find a way; We make a difference together' (Health Support Services, 2022).

1. Reflection Activity

COVID-19 put public sector leaders under pressure to deliver critical projects. Take some time to reflect on leading a team/organisation and being required to make decisions in a crisis. Consider and identify the ideal qualities and tools that a leader would need to manage in a crisis.

A call to action

In November 2020, Health Support Services was tasked with developing a system that would assist in the delivery of the State's COVID-19 immunisation program (See Appendix B for an example of the state-wide reach the system required). Hosam Aly, a Program Manager within Health Support Services, was one of a number of senior program managers tasked with leading a team to develop a system that would provide a new operational role for WA Health. To further complicate matters, the team had six weeks to deliver the project by early January 2021. It was expected that the vaccine would be available to Western Australians in early February 2021. With regards to what the project would require, Aly noted:

We had to develop a system from scratch...we engaged Deloitte as a partner to support us as they had more insight into what was going on overseas. But everywhere was unique. We had about six weeks [to deliver the project].

In addition to the rapid delivery time expected for the new system, Aly explained that the system was needed to assist in the delivery of outcomes within the Department of Health's broader COVID Response program. These key

outcomes were ‘the management of scarce COVID-19 vaccine inventory, engaging the public to access vaccination services at scale, and operating a growing network of temporary vaccine clinics’. However, to deliver the new system there were risk considerations that his team would need to overcome.

The VaccinateWA team had a considerable risk profile to contend with in the development of the VaccinateWA system. The risks associated with the project included:

- A time-pressured environment, with a six-week timeframe between project initiation and the target date for operational readiness.
- A high degree of uncertainty with the timing and volume of the vaccine – this was further exacerbated by evolving protocols in terms of vaccine eligibility rules and priority populations.
- A strong focus on quality with the importance of the program to keep people safe and healthy.
- A high degree of public scrutiny¹.

2. Reflection Activity

Imagine you are the program manager of the team that has been tasked with delivering the VaccinateWA system. Given the risk profile, the short timeframe to deliver the project (and over the end-of-year holiday period) and the demands that such a project places on your team, what considerations are needed to manage project priorities? Identify the leadership strategies you could employ to mitigate the risks.

Determining the project parameters

Aly had to determine how to lead his team to deliver VaccinateWA while mitigating the risk profile. To deliver the project in the required timeframe, many of the skills needed existed within Health Support Services. In the first instance, Aly said to deliver a system of high quality, the project required a range of business skills including information technology, solutioning, architecture, analytical, testing and project management. In addition, he said that his team would also require an external partner to support the implementation of the new vaccination platform once it was developed – this would mean going out to tender to recruit a suitable partner.

Aly, with his Program Director, Luella Forbes, and Executive Director, Ralph Bates, also had to determine what was required of them as leaders to ensure that the team could deliver the project on-time and to a high quality. The massive scope of the project was a new challenge for the team. Aly said:

Not many of us have worked in a system that was used state-wide. Most of us come from organisations where we were doing in-house applications... [we were] looking at a user base of the whole public, so about 2.5 million people in WA.

The evolving COVID-19 environment presented a challenge to Health Support Services in managing the workflow for the VaccinateWA team. Vaccine type, quantity, availability, and eligibility were the responsibility of the Federal Government. However, their decisions were responsive to international drivers (vaccine development and manufacturing and distribution capacity) and regulatory approval and safety guidelines from the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) and the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) (Therapeutic Goods Administration, 2022, p. n.p.; Aly, 2022). As a result, the system developed needed to be agile to accommodate the uncertainty. Aly explained:

You would hear on the news that...ATAGI were looking at it [COVID-19 vaccine] and approving it...Then the TGA would need to approve it for WA and then the Department of Health would respond. That was the process. Until it got approved you couldn't do anything.

We were...the last decision point. And when that decision was made, that's when we would act...It created additional time pressure in an already time pressured environment.

This also presented challenges for how the team would manage in this unpredictable work environment. Aly said:

¹ Details about the project were provided through an interview with Hosam Aly, and also through a document provided to the Institute of Public Administration Australia WA (this is not publicly available).

it was one of those environments that... for those people who want structure and want to know three months of work ahead of them how they're going to operate, it wasn't the right environment for them.

[For others] where every day is a challenge or not too sure what's going to happen here, they'd they love the environment... We had all of those types of people on our team.

With the commencement date for the vaccine roll-out announced for 22 February 2021, the challenge to deliver the VaccinateWA system increased. With 4,680 doses of the vaccination due to arrive in WA at that time, it was the WA Government's priority to begin vaccinating Western Australians as quickly as possible. Premier Mark McGowan stated:

Our priority is to make sure that any approved vaccine that becomes available can be administered to Western Australians as quickly, safely, and equitably as possible (SBS News, 2021, n.p.).
The pressure to deliver a working and reliable system before the vaccinations arrived in WA was the reality for the VaccinateWA team.

Leading through uncertainty

Developing the VaccinateWA system in a short timeframe was a complex and challenging test. In six weeks the VaccinateWA team - led by senior leaders within Health Support Services including Executive Director, Ralph Bates, Program Director, Luella Forbes and Program Manager, Hosam Aly - had to develop the VaccinateWA system. Leading the team to find a solution would be challenging.

From November 2020 to January 2021, strong leadership within Health Support Services was critical in several areas. This included:

- Resource allocation - approximately 20 fulltime employees were assigned to the VaccinateWA project with several support staff from across the organisation available to the project as required.
- Leaders within the organisation consistently worked to embed a culture that upheld the values of Health Support Services.
- To ensure accountability and integrity in all project decisions.
- To bring and keep the project team together within a pressured situation.

Leadership at all levels within Health Support Services proved to be the critical factor in overcoming the high risk profile within the project and successfully delivering a system that would provide the COVID-19 vaccine to all eligible Western Australians.

Building a productive culture

Senior leaders within Health Support Services worked hard to build a culture that was purpose-driven and values-based. Health Support Services had a clear purpose for its activities: 'We support our customers to provide excellent health care' (Health Support Services, 2022). This purpose was underpinned through the organisation's clearly stated values: 'We put our customers at the heart of what we do; We value and care for each other; We promise, we own, we do; We will find a way; We make a difference together' (Health Support Services, 2022). Senior leaders within the organisation attributed their success in responding to the government's demands during the pandemic to a workforce who reflect the organisation's values. In its Annual Report for 2020-2021, Board Chair, Michael Walsh, and Chief Executive, Robert Toms noted:

It is without a doubt, many of our achievements...were only possible thanks to the collective commitment and dedication of every single HSS [Health Support Services] team member. Together, we have demonstrated our HSS [Health Support Services] values in continuing to deliver on our purpose of supporting our customers to provide excellent health care (Health Support Services, 2021, p. 6).

Embedding these values within an organisation and its people can be a challenge for leaders (Glennon, Hodgkinson, Knowles, Radnor, & Bateman, 2017, p. 204). Aly noted that when delivering the pandemic response, within Health Support Services, daily reminders and reflection of the organisation's values became important. He said:

There were times where we had to remind ourselves of our values and continue to encourage those values. We had daily stand-ups, and you would be surprised how many times we spoke about our values...to highlight an example of where the values were being demonstrated [within the organisation] and to reiterate them.

However, when pushed to respond to the pandemic by the Government, Aly said the values embedded within the team and across the organisation, especially the senior leaders, shone through when they were put to the test. Aly noted:

The number one item for failed projects is a lack of executive support. This is probably the number one component that led to success [for VaccinateWA]. It was amazing executive support from my internal executive, but also from the Department. And that was key.

To deliver the pandemic related projects, senior leaders created a separate business unit that was led by a dedicated executive, Ralph Bates. Aly said that this was critical in empowering the VaccinateWA team to meet their rapidly approaching deadline. Aly said that Bates provided a critical role in 'supporting issues, supporting plans moving forward and being present'. In reflecting on the role senior leaders played, he said:

The values and the culture that they [senior executives] bring are very supportive and [Health Support Services is] probably one of the best organisations I've worked in with regards to culture, wellbeing and looking after staff.

We talk about leadership shadow in our space, and the leadership shadow that stems from our chief executive to the executives to the rest of us through those effects. [The leadership shadow] is one of nurturing, looking after people and making sure that wellbeing is at the forefront.

Yet, at times, the demands of the project drew into competition achieving project outcomes with organisational values. Tight timeframes within the project demanded much from the VaccinateWA team. A demand that could have required longer workdays/weeks to deliver the project on time and to the required standard. However, Aly attributed the genuine commitment to the Health Support Services' values in navigating this challenge. Aly explained:

The constant battle of timeframes was there and could have easily conflicted against our 'We value and care for each other' value. However, as a team, we ensured that whenever we came across tight deadlines, we did not immediately default to working longer hours and weekends. We looked at alternate ways to achieve the need while looking after our people.

Alternatives employed by leaders to reinforce their commitment to the organisational values while overcoming conflicting project demands included:

- Reprioritisation of tasks and activities within the project schedule
- Additional resources (people) assigned/reassigned to prioritised activities
- Review and focus on the minimal viable product.

Aly explained that this approach ensured that the project's quality was not compromised, nor was the wellbeing of the VaccinateWA team.

Accountability and integrity in decision-making

Delivering VaccinateWA meant understanding the requirements of the project and going out to tender to procure the platform and support needed. Procurement processes can be lengthy and require agencies to adhere to procurement rules and practices. These practices are in place to ensure accountability in the spending of public funds and to ensure a successful outcome for the WA community (Department of Finance WA, 2022, n.p.). The

VaccinateWA leaders were aware that getting across the requirements of the project was critical in enabling the successful development of the system, and ensuring that Western Australians were protected from the COVID-19 virus. Aly explained:

There's methodologies, frameworks and approaches that we all follow. There was work done to understand the requirements of the business, which was the WA Health System, the people who were... delivering the vaccinations. Through understanding those requirements and going to market...we could understand the level of effort and what we would need to deliver on and how to support it.

Determining the requirements of the project was critical in aligning the team effort needed to deliver VaccinateWA. Ensuring that the team had the necessary skill sets, number of team members and departmental support enhanced accountability and integrity in the delivery of the project. Aly said:

Time pressure was on us...[but] we were never going to compromise on quality.

In achieving this outcome, Aly said that by the time the VaccinateWA system was required, the Department of Health had developed good systems as part of their pandemic response in the earlier stages of the pandemic. The team were able to capitalise on this existing corporate and clinical knowledge when delivering VaccinateWA. He said:

There was a large program [pandemic response initiatives] in the Department of Health and we were one stream...We set good accountability and guidelines for people to work in and be successful in what they do.

Despite the six-week timeframe, the potential for public scrutiny and meeting political expectations of the project emphasised the need for the project to adhere to all accountability measures that are used within the WA Public Sector. Aligning these two objectives presented a challenge for the VaccinateWA leaders in managing the project and the team. Aly noted:

In a crisis, things can happen quickly [but, we] still need to follow governance processes. We've got procurement processes that support emergency procurements, and in situations like this, everything was done to existing processes or COVID-19 emergency mandates that were put through...for example, for the large partnering model, we went out [to tender] for quotes and RFP [request for proposal].

Maintaining morale

During the development of VaccinateWA, effective leadership kept the team motivated and performing despite the challenging conditions and expectations. Aly explained that being part of the pandemic response provided the team with a purpose that drove their commitment to the project. He said:

We did not want to be the barrier for people getting a vaccine. It was unpalatable for a number of reasons. Obviously from a reputational perspective but [also] from an internal perspective...we all signed up to do something for WA Health and for the Australian public...I would say my team took this to heart to make sure that it was successful.

However, the VaccinateWA leaders understood that the project would be demanding of the team and could take its toll on their wellbeing and continuation with the project. As a result, the wellbeing of the team was a priority. Aly said that this was especially important when the team was required to work from home. He explained:

We worked through some very difficult times. [To keep] morale...we put in some principles and playing rules around remote working with regards to checking in on one another. [For example] when you have a meeting, turn your camera on so we can catch up.

We had late nights. Some of the areas in our team would...work until 11pm. But we managed the work/life balance and ensured that we gave more time off. But they weren't doing 80-hour weeks...[We]

looked after the people and the wellbeing and as a result we had people that were on it [the project] from the start and all the way to the end.

Other strategies the VaccinateWA leaders put in place with the team included greater communication, connection and celebrating their achievements. Aly noted:

[As a] team lead you make sure you're talking to your team once a day. Not to talk about work, just talk to them. You missed the conversations that you would typically have and people...start to become distant. So [I] was very conscious...that people weren't out of sight, out of mind. We put in weekly touch points to have a coffee or...a bit of a celebration.

Aly acknowledged that funding, prioritisation and resources was important in supporting the requirements of the project, he said having a committed team was the critical factor in achieving the VaccinateWA system.

3. Reflection Activity

Consider the role of culture and values in the effectiveness of organisations. What are some factors that can help integrate culture and values within an organisation?

Vaccinating Western Australians

By January 2021, VaccinateWA was developed to enable online bookings and the management of COVID-19 vaccinations in Western Australia. The VaccinateWA team were the first in Australia to develop a system that allowed for online bookings, that was also integrated with the Commonwealth system (Australian Immunisation Register) and was ready to go for the first vaccines that arrived in WA. Aly explained:

By providing the community with a digital, self-service vaccination booking and record system, we have enabled vaccine recipients' full flexibility and choice regarding many aspects of their COVID-19 vaccination.

In reflection of the outcome VaccinateWA achieved, Health Support Services' senior leaders, Board Chair, Michael Walsh and Chief Executive, Robert Toms noted:

The state-wide rollout of a COVID-19 vaccination program has been a vital strategy in the WA Government's goal to protect Western Australians.

Through a dedicated team, we were able to procure and rapidly develop VaccinateWA.

As of 30 June 2021, 409,181 people have registered on VaccinateWA, of which 219,915 have received their first dose of a vaccine, and 121,399 people have received both doses (Health Support Services, 2021, p. 7).

Walsh and Toms also noted the importance of supporting their workforce to achieve outcomes across Health Support Services. They said that an engaged workforce is more productive, and it is the role of leaders within the organisation to ensure that this engagement is maintained and supported. They stated:

Having a culture that maintains a highly engaged and satisfied workforce is integral to delivering the best outcomes for our customers...83 per cent of our workforce took part in the Minister for Health's Your Voice in Health Survey in March 2021. While our engagement score remained the same, results from the survey provided us with valuable indicators on what was important to and valued by our people, and revealed areas where we can continue to do better (Health Support Services, 2021, p. 10).

The VaccinateWA system achieved the expectations of the Western Australian Government. With the WA public able to access vaccination bookings online, Premier Mark McGowan said:

The new online tools will help people eligible to book in for their vaccination ...My priority is to ensure we have as many people vaccinated as possible (Media Statements, 2021).

Conclusion

Aly noted that while the scale and importance of the project were omnipresent during the development of VaccinateWA, at the time, this was the reality that the Department of Health had been working in since the pandemic began. Consequently, the biggest pressure on the team was time. Delivering the new system within six weeks stretched the team, however they didn't want to be the reason a person couldn't get vaccinated. Aly said:

We managed through our culture and our values to support one another and be able to pivot well...and deliver. It's [an] amazing achievement. And that's the team...I'm not talking about myself² (Aly, 2022).

With a clear focus on the outcome the team was tasked to deliver, Aly attributes the established and embedded culture within Health Support Services, and subsequently the team, as the driving factor that led to the success of VaccinateWA. As he noted:

People were happy to work outside their guard rails...we were happy to do any other job that was needed and support anyone else.

[For example,] the 'we will find a way' value resonates strongly [with the team] ...Where issues arose and had the ability to derail the project, many of the team put up their hands to support streams of work...in an effort to bring activities back on track. Some examples of this included the Business Analysts and Service Desk Agents testing the release to ensure it met requirements and quality standards. Another example was on 'go-live' where several team members went outside of their normal work and commute cycles to provide in-person support across some of the larger clinics to those frontline nurses and support staff.

Genuine caring...stems from our executive all the way down. My executive...cares about people and that is the leadership shadow that has gone through all of us.

Key lessons can be drawn from this case about the critical role leadership plays in a high performing public sector agency. First, leadership at all levels as critical in developing, embedding and maintaining a productive workplace culture. Teamwork was critical in delivering a rapid response to a community need during the pandemic. Health Support Services had the culture embedded throughout the organisation and were able to redirect its workforce swiftly to meet to needs of the sector. A positive culture enabled Health Support Services to respond to rapidly shifting priorities while supporting their workforce. Aly said that despite the challenge of delivering the project and the demands it placed on the team, the culture and values that were embedded shone through and they retained all team members despite the pressure placed on them.

In addition, a strong agency culture, with its values modelled by its leaders, fostered greater accountability and integrity within its workforce. Aly identified that the team were committed to delivering a quality outcome for the community and following departmental processes was key in achieving this. Aly said that the culture within Health Support Services fosters teams to work together to achieve shared objectives and this is led from the top by the senior leaders.

Finally, leadership was a key driver in empowering the VaccinateWA team to manage the risks associated with delivering a project within uncertain conditions. With the key risks being short delivery time, pandemic uncertainty and public scrutiny, strong leadership was a driving factor that enabled these risks to be mitigated. With a strong culture underpinning the organisation, the VaccinateWA team were able to draw on the expertise from across Health Support Services as they focussed on outcomes and a 'one team mindset'. In addition, Aly noted that 'An efficient governance structure...facilitated fast and informed decision making' (Aly, 2022).

This case has shown the critical role culture plays in a high performing agency. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the public sector's capacity to respond in a crisis. Importantly, a broader lesson that the public sector can take from this case is the central role of leaders in demonstrating and embedding the values of its agency at every opportunity – this may be the factor the prepares the public sector to respond to future crises.

² See Appendix C for a photo of the VaccinateWA team

Acknowledgements

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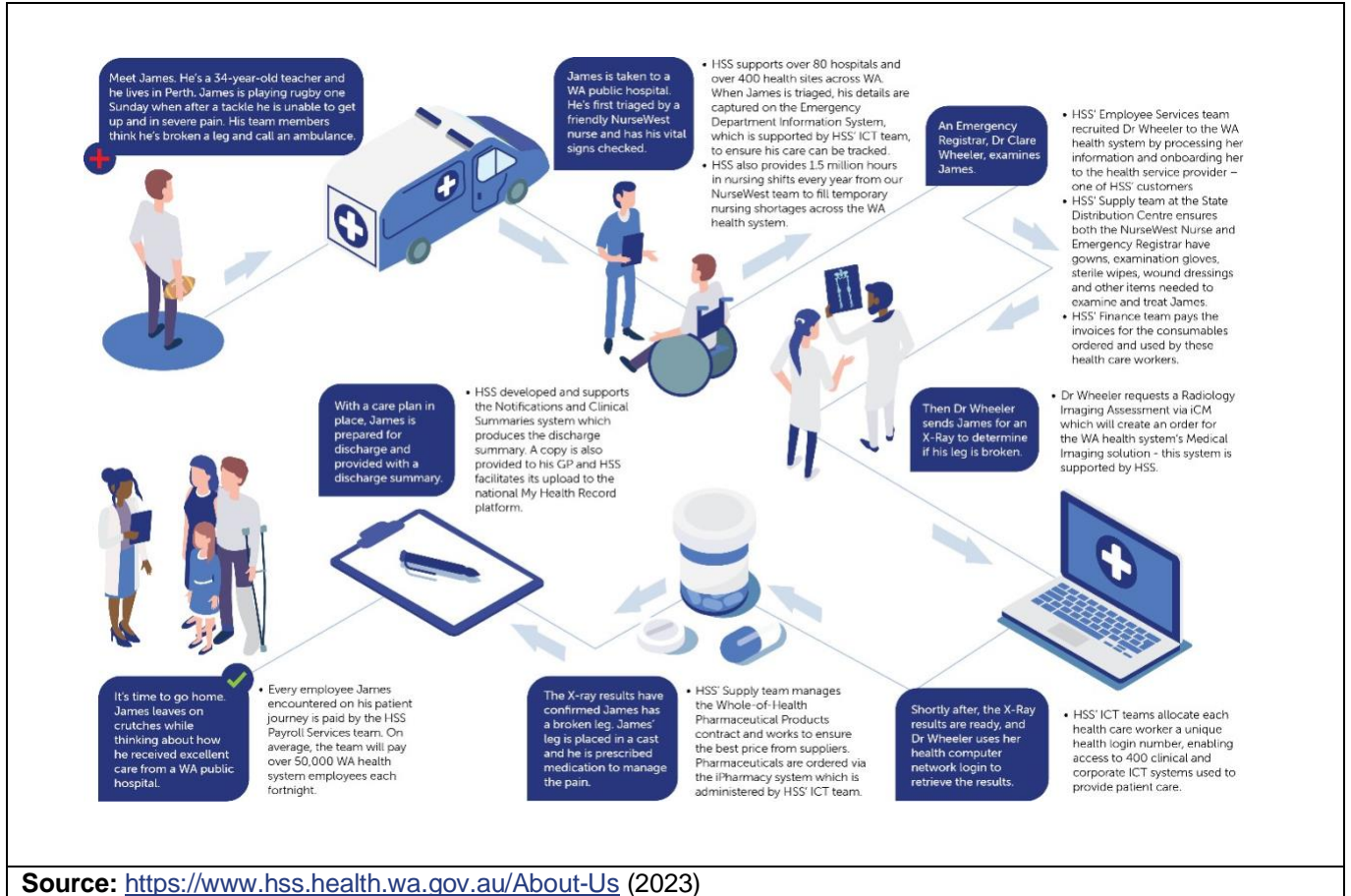
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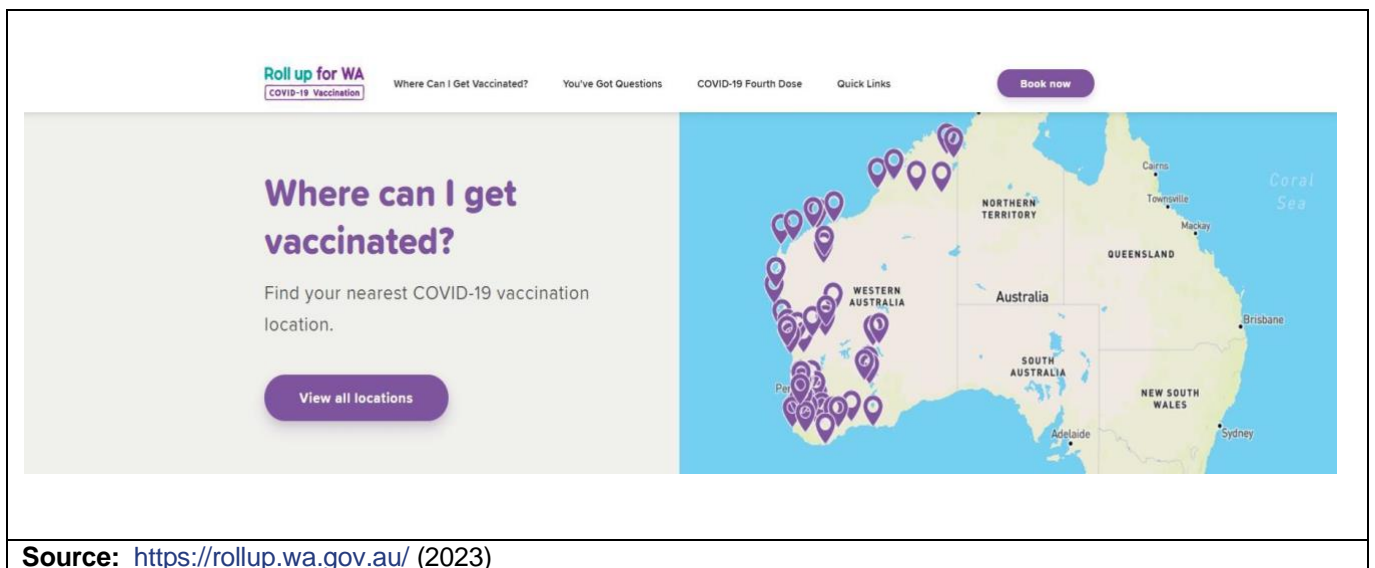


Appendices

Appendix A- The role of Health Support Services with the Department of Health WA



Appendix B- Example of the VaccinateWA state-wide scope



Appendix C- Health Support Services, VaccinateWA Team



Source: Provided by the author (2023)

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