

I am a secondary teacher who works in a [REDACTED] school in WA. I have been teaching full-time for [REDACTED] and was diagnosed in 2022 with [REDACTED]

Until February/March 2022, Western Australia was one of the few places in the world to not have COVID-19. It was idyllic. We knew that the borders would be opened but could not have envisioned that all mitigations would be dropped, making it extremely difficult to attend work or access healthcare safely.

The personal impact of the decisions made by National Cabinet to drop mitigations has been massive for me. In March 2022 Covid started to spread in [REDACTED] and at first spread slowly in the school. In one week in May, when indoor mask mandates were dropped, [REDACTED] teachers in my department and the adjacent department caught Covid. I was left to pick up the work of our other only [REDACTED] teacher and the technician for the week they were away. I continued to wear a mask, but the stress of the extra work on top of my teaching load made my [REDACTED] worsen, and I 'crashed' for several days, too unwell to work. Our school did not grant extra leave for teachers with Covid. The teacher in the department adjacent to mine has had no sick leave for over a year [REDACTED] so he teaches even while very ill and refuses to test for Covid because it costs him [REDACTED] a day to stay home. I feel unsafe working with teachers that might have Covid, as they have been instructed to come to work if they feel well enough to do so and can choose to wear a mask or not.

[REDACTED] is similar to Long Covid (46% of Long Covid cases meet the criteria for [REDACTED] and is worsened by any exertion. My condition was classified as mild until August 2023 when I caught a [REDACTED] at school, and my condition declined. I am awaiting a serology result to see if the virus was Covid as I didn't test positive on a RAT at the time. I worked the rest of the year using a [REDACTED] but am currently too unwell to work. I hope to be able to work at a [REDACTED] load in 2024, which will cause physical strain and financial hardship.

I wrote to the principal of my [REDACTED] college in September 2022, concerned about the latest wave of Covid. I advised them that I have [REDACTED] and my condition is likely to decline if I contract Covid. I sent them information about teachers contracting Long Covid (at the time we were highest risk out of all professions) and studies on Long Covid and cognitive dysfunction in children. The principal sent my concerns on to the facilities manager who told me that HEPA filters 'do nothing'. We have no mitigations in place at school. Our classrooms are mostly 40 years old and have poor ventilation. There are no HEPA purifiers, the HVAC systems are old, and the leadership of the school refuse to mention covid, laughing and calling it 'the C-word we don't talk about at school'. Working in a system that doesn't take Covid seriously is difficult when you know it could disable you. I purchased a HEPA filter for one of the classrooms that I regularly teach in and make sure they are as well-ventilated as I can. I also wear a high-quality mask, but teaching practical subjects to sick students in crowded classrooms means that my mask is not always effective.

The school will maintain that they are following government regulations - because there are none. In September 2022, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that Covid was no longer exceptional, mandatory isolation would end, and he repeatedly compared it to the flu. Covid is highly contagious and unlike the flu (which increases risk in pulmonary issues), damages nearly every system and organ in the body.

Schools with good ventilation/filtration can reduce illness by up to 80%. SafeWork Australia advise that '*consistent indoor air concentration of less than 800 parts per million (ppm) CO2 is likely to indicate that a space is well ventilated*' but classrooms are frequently over 1400ppm (I have an Inkbird CO2 monitor). If schools were advised they had to meet guidelines for clean air, then I would have been at a lower risk of disablement from a virus.

As a teacher with a [REDACTED], I have been privy to many conversations with students regarding Covid. Two students I know have been diagnosed with [REDACTED] in the past few months and many others have not been well since their first or second covid infection and are absent from the classroom with medical appointments and other illnesses. Repeat infections increase the risk of Long Covid, so I am very concerned for children who will be contracting Covid-19 multiple times a year. If 46% of Long Covid cases become [REDACTED] many of the students that I teach will become disabled like me in the decades to come.

The public health messaging around Covid has been inconsistent and vague. Most people do not understand that it is an airborne virus, they do not know how to prevent it or what to do when they have it. They do not understand that a negative RAT doesn't mean that they do not have covid. They do not understand that a person can be contagious even if they don't have symptoms. They do not understand that a large percentage of people are asymptomatic. They do not understand that the vaccines aren't sterilising and that their effectiveness wanes. They do not understand that Covid begins as a respiratory virus but is also a systemic vascular disease.

My frail [REDACTED] is taken shopping once a week and doesn't wear a mask because 'the government said Covid was over' and 'no-one else does'. She also doesn't understand that if she recovers from a Covid infection that her immunity will be reduced and she could have longer term complications. A [REDACTED] with [REDACTED] told me (in late 2023) that she makes everyone who enters her house wash their hands so that she doesn't get Covid. She doesn't know that it's airborne.

We need public health messaging about all of these topics. People need to understand that they can reduce the risk of contracting Covid by wearing a good quality well-fitting mask and by ventilating and filtering air.

Personally, I am reluctant to seek any healthcare currently as the risk of contracting Covid is so high. I am overdue for a dental appointment but my regular dentist has small rooms without HEPA filtration and the dentists only wear surgical masks. Hospital-acquired infections are very common. I am stunned, that after periods of travel I isolated for 14 days at a time, with police at my door, and a threat of a \$50k fine if I left my house, yet we cannot keep people in Aged Care

and people in hospitals safe from Covid. One [REDACTED] I know contracted Covid in hospital during her treatment for [REDACTED]. She has [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and had to stop treatment for 2 weeks while she took anti-virals for Covid. We need N95 masks in healthcare and airborne infection control so that everyone is able to access healthcare safely.

Concerning access to anti-virals like Paxlovid, we need wider eligibility. They help to prevent Long Covid so are life-changing not only in the short-term, but over many years. I have been told by 3 doctors that I'm not eligible for Paxlovid, despite data showing that 75% of people with [REDACTED] do not return to their baseline within 6 months. If I contract Covid I will have to purchase the anti-virals at a cost of \$1080. My [REDACTED] is currently 'moderate' and I am able to live independently. I am currently trying to access community care for help around the home. If I become 'severe' I will be [REDACTED] and will need part-time or full-time carers. In [REDACTED] online groups I asked people how they fared after contracting Covid and collected their stories – so many have declined and are now severe and [REDACTED], with very little sign of recovery.

It has been a shock to go from someone who was very active in the community, to now be unable to leave the house; at first because covid became so widespread with the removal of isolation and income support, and now because I'm disabled. In the space of 18 months, from February 2022 to August 2023 my life changed drastically, from being an extroverted artist and teacher to someone housebound who has found socialising very difficult due to the government's minimising messaging that Covid is nothing to worry about.

We need clean air in schools, masks in healthcare and on public transport (high-risk people need access) and quality public health messaging that covid is not going away so we need to adapt.

46% of Long Covid patients meet the criteria for [REDACTED]
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9844405/>

What is [REDACTED]
<https://www.emerge.org.au/what-is-mecfs/>

Teaching and education staff are the equal highest-risk profession for contracting Long Covid.
<https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/education-joint-top-sector-affected-long-covid>

Risks of organ damage is cumulative with repeat infections
<https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-1749502/v1>

[safe work australia – monitoring the quality of indoor air ventilation](#)
<https://covid19.swa.gov.au/doc/improving-ventilation-indoor-workplaces-covid-19>

Italian study shows ventilation can cut school COVID cases by 82%

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italian-study-shows-ventilation-can-cut-school-covid-cases-by-82-2022-03-22/>

Cognitive decline was apparent in almost all cases of Australian patients who had the Alpha strain. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-25/long-covid-clinic-st-vincent-cognitive-decline/101178450?fbclid=IwAR3g2Cv6sh-LyEjFsIXfmCFHeKLfChg28FJRE_t8P711o4OLv8SzD0MOONw&fs=e&s=cl

Covid is not the same as the flu

<https://fortune.com/2023/12/14/covid-19-v-flu-more-serious-threat-new-study-health-carolyn-barber/>

COVID-19: Study Suggests Long-term Damage to Immune System

<https://www.infectioncontroltoday.com/view/covid-19-study-suggests-long-term-damage-immune-system>

Hospital Acquired Covid infections

https://ozsage.org/media_releases/immediate-action-is-needed-to-reduce-hospital-acquired-covid-19-infections-and-deaths/

Paxlovid reduces the risk of Long Covid by 26% over a 6 month period

<https://medicine.wustl.edu/news/paxlovid-reduces-risk-of-long-term-health-problems-death-from-covid-19/>