

Submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

I live in [REDACTED] Western Australia, and I am the parent and carer for my [REDACTED] who has an [REDACTED]

The early days of the pandemic in 2020 were very difficult. Having to also care for someone with a disability and trying to explain what was happening to my [REDACTED] was a big challenge.

The personal impact of Federal and State border closures was hard. I have family in [REDACTED] and was due to visit in March 2020. I understood the need for borders to close, and I am grateful that it allowed many people, particularly in Western Australia, to remain largely unaffected by the impact of Covid-19 in terms of their health for another 2 years. However, I also acknowledge the pain this caused for those who could either not get back to Australia due to international quarantine limits, or were unable to attend important events in other States.

In terms of the role of National Cabinet in decision making, I believe it is essential that all National Cabinet Minutes relating to the pandemic are made public. I voted for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in the hope of transparency ([REDACTED] 2022). Australians need to know what decisions were made because the pandemic still continues to affect so many peoples' lives.

Health response measures should always have acknowledged that Covid-19 is an airborne virus. An investigation into the outbreak on the Diamond Princess ship in 2020 concluded that "aerosol inhalation was likely the dominant contributor to COVID-19 transmission among the passengers" ([REDACTED] et al., 2021, p.1). We have known about this method of transmission for a very long time. Public health messaging with a focus on hand washing is not enough. I believe that if there had been more messaging from Federal and State Governments about the nature of the virus and how it is spread, there would be more people currently wearing masks or respirators and less of the stigma attached to wearing one that there now is. It took my [REDACTED] who needs time to get used to new routines, quite some time to get used to wearing a mask. In case masks are mandated again, he continues to wear them in indoor spaces where there are lots of people. It is easier to do this than to move back and forth from no masking to masking.

I was grateful for the free Rapid Antigen Tests that were provided by the government of Western Australia. My [REDACTED], when he feels unwell, tends to minimise his symptoms. It was reassuring being able to test him daily when he has been unwell. It also helped to limit household spread.

In terms of vaccines, both the Morrison and Albanese governments were and are far too slow in procuring them. However I fear that vaccines are already not keeping up with the changing nature of variants, particularly in light of the emergence of JN.1. If vaccines are the only strategy that we have in place then we need to be looking at other mitigations such as mask wearing in certain situations and improved ventilation. At the very least anti-viral medication should be readily available for all age groups that are able to take them. There should also be investment

in developing better treatments given that Covid-19 is likely to be with us for quite some time yet.

The financial support available in 2020 was a help to my family. My [REDACTED] is employed at a [REDACTED] which temporarily closed in 2020 and my [REDACTED] received Job Keeper. There should still be paid leave for those that are sick because of the virus. The cost of living crisis will only get worse due to those in face to face work having to use up sick leave, annual leave and unpaid leave because of multiple yearly infections. I would also like to know how the Federal Government plans to support those with Long Covid. A report released on 8 December 2023 from Statistics Canada has revealed that:

By June 2023, about one in nine (11.7%) of the total adult population reported experiencing long-term symptoms, defined as the presence of symptoms three or more months after a COVID-19 infection that could not be explained by anything else. This represents 3.5 million Canadians, and nearly 1 in 5 (19.0%) Canadian adults who had been infected at least once (Kuang et al., 2023, p.1).

Why is there silence from Australian Federal and State Governments on this issue, which I find hard to believe is confined only to Canada? This is appalling public health in action.

Australians now cannot record their Rapid Antigen Tests. Weekly results should be reinstated by all States and made available and easy to find. If this is now down to personal responsibility the general public need to have all the facts to make informed decisions.

When case numbers reach a certain threshold this should prompt a return to mask mandates in high risk settings such as hospitals and health care facilities. Townsville Hospital recently had 106 staff members testing positive for Covid-19 ([REDACTED], 2023). This should be enough evidence of the need for mask mandates at the start of a wave. I am tired of this reactive rather than proactive approach.

Australia would be better prepared for current and future pandemics if the government would follow the steps below:

- Acknowledging that Covid-19 is airborne, having proper ventilation strategies for places of high transmission such as schools, and placing scientists and epidemiologists at the heart of decision making.
- Allow people to record positive Rapid Antigen test results and regular publishing of figures so that there is an accurate representation of just how much Covid-19 is in the community. This needs to happen if people are expected to make their own decisions about their safety.
- Antiviral access needs to be broader if we are relying on a vaccine only strategy.
- Mask mandates should be in place in high risk settings such as hospitals and doctors surgeries when there is a surge in the number of cases. This needs to happen at the start of the wave. Federal and State governments need to collaborate in their approach to this.

- I would like to see evidence of hybrid immunity and immunity debt claims if the Australian Government wishes to continue along this path. I would also like to see evidence that the pursuit of hybrid immunity does not result in people getting sicker due to multiple infections.
- Long Covid needs to be acknowledged. Some people do not just bounce back to health after they become sick with Covid-19. There also needs to be investment into research and support for those who become sick long term because of Covid-19 infection.
- It is important that there is recognition that some people have been vaccine injured. I have been vaccinated myself but the Federal Government needs to acknowledge that the vaccine does not work for everyone and can have more serious side effects for some.
- There absolutely needs to be an acknowledgement that many people have died in Australia during this pandemic. There needs to be a memorial site. Loved ones should not be forgotten. This needs to be a priority for the current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

In summary, Australia would be better prepared for the current and any future pandemics by following the science, and listening to and following the advice of many scientists and epidemiologists, not just a select few. I am disappointed with the past and current responses from the previous Coalition Government and the Australian Labor Party. The responses have been disjointed, differ from State to State, and this un-coordinated approach in my opinion may well have cost lives. All politicians with an investment in their own children's future should be acknowledging the true impact of this ongoing pandemic.

References

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