

# **Submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry**

## **Personal submission of Peter Vogel**

I am 69 years old and I live in NSW with my wife and the youngest two of my five children. I am a solicitor practising in all areas of civil law.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest disruption of my lifetime. In general, the government response was as good as can be expected in the early days when there were so many unknowns. I felt that we were encouraged to be cautious, not just to protect ourselves, but for the welfare of all Australians. There was a sense of us all being in it together. Border closures, lockdowns and the “vaccine plus” approach made sense and saved thousands of lives.

The abandonment of this strategy at the end of 2021 in favour of a vaccine-only approach was premised on the principle that everyone should make their own plans and decisions depending on their personal risk assessment.

This approach is deeply problematic in many ways for many Australians. I would like to address just one major shortcoming, and that has been the lack of information essential for me to make informed decisions about my health and my children’s health as detailed below.

### **Lack of transparency**

Policy decisions by AHPPC, ATAGI, TGA, National Cabinet and other health bodies concerning COVID-19 have been and continue to be delivered as pronouncements justified by nothing more than stock phrases like “this is a proportionate decision”.

All decisions impacting health at either a public or individual level should be subject to public scrutiny. Openness and accountability are essential to ensuring that health-related decisions are made in the best interest of the public. Public scrutiny can help identify potential conflicts of interest, ensure evidence-based decision-making, and hold decision-makers accountable for their choices. Transparency builds trust and fosters informed public discourse.

Even though I am a lawyer and have made many applications for very basic information about COVID-19 and the public health response, most of these applications have been refused on the ground that it would be contrary to public policy to provide the information or that it is exempt, for example because it was part of a governmental deliberative process.

It is completely unsatisfactory that interested individuals or organisations need to resort to questions in Parliament or applications under freedom of information laws to uncover the information underpinning the ever-changing public health policies adopted. The United States CDC has been very much better in that respect, and I hope that the new Australian Centre for Disease Control will improve access to scientific information, although I fear their mandate may not extend to providing policy information.

Lack of transparency also undermines trust in governments and fuels conspiracy theories.

### **Failure of public health education**

Australia has a well-earned reputation as a world leader in public health education – “Slip slop slap”, “Life. Be in it.”, “Quit for life”, “Get it on”, “Under 0.5 or under arrest”.

There has been a conspicuous lack of comparable public health campaigns in relation to COVID. Even people who are highly motivated to seek out information about protecting themselves and others from this highly contagious virus will find it difficult to locate simple tips. More significantly, there has been no public health campaign on the scale of those which addressed issues such as skin cancer, AIDS or smoking targeting the whole population.

As a result, basic primary prevention is not being adopted to the degree required to make a significant impact and those who are informed and act accordingly to protect themselves and others are usually met with ridicule and disbelief.

In the same way most Australians know that skin cancer is a major killer and wearing a hat and sunscreen reduces risk, public health campaigns should by now have ensured that everyone knows that (for example) for COVID and other airborne diseases:

- Spreads through the air like cigarette smoke and lots of people in poorly ventilated spaces greatly increases risk.
- You should stay home if sick – you could be contagious for a week or more, even after symptoms abate.
- Even healthy young people can get very sick for weeks or more.
- Infection or vaccination only provide temporary protection, you can get infected several times a year.
- Which masks are best and how to wear them.
- Even if your symptoms are mild, you can be left with ongoing health issues after initial COVID infection.

### **CONCLUSION**

Providing full transparency about all aspects of existing or new health threats and government response will enhance confidence in the public health response, improve compliance, and help individuals and their doctors make the best decisions for their particular circumstances.

Personally, the prevailing lack of transparency continues to make it difficult for me to make informed choices for myself and my children. It has also undermined my confidence that the government is acting on the science rather than some other political agenda when setting policies around vaccine availability, infection control in health care etc. For example, ATAGI now says my children cannot have a booster, whereas most other OECD countries are encouraging them. Perhaps

there is a good reason for this, but in present climate of secrecy I have no way of satisfying myself that this is not just a cost-cutting measure. I am encouraged to discuss vaccinations with my GP, but they are also denied access to the rationale of the decision-makers.

Effective and timely public health education will enable everyone to understand the nature of current or future threats and take appropriate steps to protect themselves and others. The public health education vacuum has a detrimental effect on me and my family as we are involuntarily exposed to avoidable risks as we go about our daily lives due to widespread ignorance. It is highly distressing to have to explain fundamental prevention strategies on a daily basis to the majority of the population who do not go to such lengths to inform themselves.

I, my wife and children should not have to explain to the children's teachers or bus drivers or even health care workers the basics of infection control. That is the job of public health. They have one job and they consistently fail to do it.

**Peter Vogel**

**15 December 2023**