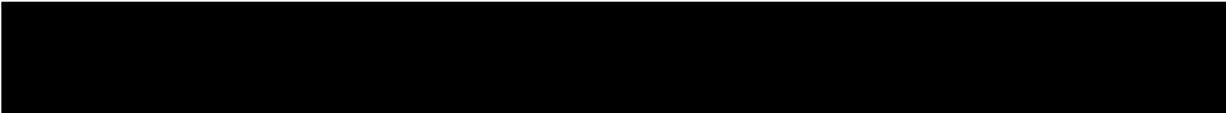



Covid-19 Response Inquiry

15 December 2023

Dear Response Inquiry,



required to make every effort to reduce the likelihood of the event occurring. In Australia alone, there have been tens of thousands of direct deaths due to COVID-19 and magnitudes more suffering from mild to extreme and ongoing, debilitating ill health. As an engineer, I see this as an abject, and ongoing, failure of the Government to identify, implement, communicate, and manage effective strategies to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 in the general population.

My submission relates to the areas of the Inquiry terms of reference that have impacted me and where therefore my voice can contribute. These are the:

- Performance of the Governance and advisory bodies
- Key health response measures
- Mechanisms to better target future response to meet population needs.

The following paragraphs document my experiences, positive and negative, and opportunities for a different approach that could improve future outcomes for both this COVID-19 pandemic and the next novel virus that arrives on our shores.

It is important for any advisory body that they provide both the technical expertise specific to the situation and the independence to provide advice without a preconception about what the politically palatable outcome will be. There are of course challenges with finding experts on a novel virus due to the inherent absence of pre-existing data and research. As someone who is a trusted advisor within the industry I work in, reviewing the expertise of the individuals within the groups advising the government was a key first step for me in assessing the advice being provided. In many cases, checks indicated the advisors were working outside their fields of expertise and experience. In some cases, the advice coming from the advisory bodies and being communicated from the individual advisors to the public was (and still is) out of step with the global body of scientific research and tended to opinion rather than knowledge. These discrepancies are not explained to the public. The public are told by the Government that the advisors are, universally, leading experts. Instead, the value of contribution and level of inaccuracy varies and discredits the remaining experts. In particular, the advice given to the Government by the Chief Medical Officer was inconsistent with global experts on COVID-19 and increased the likelihood of transmission by falsely minimising the consequences of infection.

Not dying is a pretty low bar to set when we consider COVID-19 impacts to our population, yet that has been the consistent benchmark set by the Government. The Australian population has been

told by the Government that it is ok to catch COVID-19, that the more you catch it the less chance you have of catching it, that children don't get COVID-19, that children don't transmit COVID-19, that avoiding COVID-19 leads to "immunity debt". None of these statements is true. The peer reviewed scientific research does not provide evidence to support to them. We all wish and hope that they were true. But, unlike the USA and their approach to gun violence, we don't rely on 'hopes and prayers' to solve our biggest issues. We expect our Government to have leading, expert guidance that follows the current global best practice in dealing with issues like COVID-19 and are free to deliver advice without bias or political motivation. We have been let down by the Government and their advisors in their dealing with COVID-19. In the future, we need for the Government and advisors to stay up to date with the changing nature of understanding with developing viruses and to work within the limitations of their training and experience. They need to be able to clearly communicate when the scientific understanding has changed and that therefore so has the advice. We can't be left to rely on hopes and prayers that we will be the lucky ones that don't get ongoing health issues due to an infection. Even more so, we deserve better than to not even understand this potential consequence so we can make informed decisions about what measures are appropriate to us as individuals to mitigate the likelihood of exposure. Good, personal responsibility can only be taken when you are in full understanding of the issues. It appears to me that the Government, supported by their advisors, has taken an approach that promotes ignorance and apathy.

The Government's initial response to limit transmission of COVID-19 were prudent given the uncertainty. It was communicated to the population that quarantine, testing and tracking were key, and these were generally carried out well in the early months of the pandemic. We were warned that if we allowed COVID-19 to spread unchecked that the resultant virus mutation rate would mean that science would not be able to generate vaccines quickly enough to get ahead. And we were all reliant on the breakthrough vaccine that would allow a resumption of "normal" life. Unfortunately, we are still waiting for a vaccine that provides immunity to COVID-19. The vaccines that have been developed and distributed do not prevent or even significantly reduce the transmission of COVID-19, at best they reduce the initial symptoms to the extent that the likelihood of death is reduced. Yet, the Government proceeded with dropping all health initiatives as soon as the vaccine was administered, as if it was the panacea that we were all hoping for. When conditions change (i.e. vaccine not preventing transmission) then we need to change our plans. The Government has not. Instead, the express reason we were all so careful initially, mass transmission, has been adopted as a health response when evidence is clear that the initial concerns of the health professionals that mass transmission leads to virus mutation and reducing effectiveness of existing vaccines has been proven true.

What protection is provided by the available vaccines is also poorly distributed. The Government has decided our children are not worth vaccinating. Their only vaccine doses were administered almost 2 years ago and now offer no protection. Elsewhere in the developed world, children have received boosters and current vaccines. The Government has chosen for our children to be exposed to the potential of life-long ill health and made COVID-19 infection a certainty. The inaccurate health messaging with regards to children has amplified the risk. We have heard on repeat from Government "experts" that children do not get COVID-19, then that children don't get very sick from COVID-19 and certainly that children don't transmit COVID-19. These are all lies. The scientific data proves the opposite, yet the Government has done nothing to address and reverse the prevalent understanding in the community that there is no issue.

I note that there was some effort of correction by the Government in response to the developing understanding that COVID-19 is an air-borne virus. But the general population still thinks that hand washing provides them a beneficial protection from COVID-19, while undertaking measures to

provide clean air in indoor spaces and wear masks is too difficult and treats people who try to promote these effective measures as “extremists”.

The Government’s targeted response specifically excluded supporting our school children. They were and still are forced into a school environment that has insufficient controls to prevent COVID-19 transmission. Clean air requirements are not mandated or measured. Attendance is upheld over health. The concomitant impacts of rampant in-school COVID-19 transmission on the wider school communities and aging family members are ignored. Our young people don’t even understand the vulnerable position the Government has put them in due to the constant gas-lighting over the impacts of COVID-19 that are demonstrated to occur over the long term. My children continue to attempt to protect themselves using the only measure they have within their control, masks. In engineering, personal protective equipment (PPE) is the very bottom of the ladder when it comes to effective risk controls. It is a sad state that in Australia that is the best we have to offer our youth, and only if they have the fortitude and resilience to do it for themselves.

In engineering terms, we typically assess risks using a matrix to assess the combination of the consequence of an event happening and the likelihood of that outcome. Risks that plot other than low risk need to have the adequacy of the controls assessed and further controls implemented to lower the risk as part of a formal risk management process. I would suggest that a robust risk assessment and review of control measures’ effectiveness in mitigating either the likelihood or severity of the health impact be implemented for future pandemic responses. The risk management process needs to be undertaken with the contribution of suitably experienced and independent experts and be evidence based. For COVID-19, clean air, masking and population wide access to current vaccines and antivirals have been demonstrated as effective control measures and the Government should be focusing on these now.

Sometimes doing the right thing is inconvenient, it is uncomfortable, it is hard. It is therefore important that we all understand why we need to do these hard things, how they help, how we are all supported to participate, equitably, and that we are all working together, and then we can succeed. Just like climate change. We need to bring everyone with us to be successful. That is leadership. That is what we need from the Government in response the current and future pandemics.

Sincerely,