

30 December 2023

Dear Panel Members,

Re: Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 response.

Introduction

My name is [REDACTED] and I am a [REDACTED] who is passionate about improving our lived reality in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and our preparedness for future pandemics. I currently work as an [REDACTED] at a [REDACTED] and have experience in community development and mental health counselling from my various internships and volunteering commitments.

After witnessing countless infections and reinfections in my personal life and around the world, I made it my personal mission to help improve the COVID-19 situation we are facing today. In the past year, I have dedicated extensive hours into researching COVID-19 and providing various supports to my workplace and local communities in [REDACTED] NSW to reduce the burden of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations including people with disabilities, people with lower socioeconomic status, seniors, and CALD people. I will integrate my experiences in my submission below for your consideration.

COVID-19 is a highly contagious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2, which can lead to serious long-term effects and even death. It was even the third leading cause of death in Australia in 2022.¹ I strongly support an inquiry into the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 response to ensure a stronger and healthier nation, and a sustainable future for all. My submission will address the area of 'key health response measures'.

Key health response measures

Key health response measures should be continually updated to ensure appropriate measures that align with the current research. This was not effectively addressed in Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly after the vaccines were introduced and lockdowns were lifted. From then, the common attitude amongst the mainstream population was that life was "back to normal" and that everyone should "live with COVID" by relaxing preventative measures such as mask-wearing, isolating, physical distancing, and vaccine boosters.

Instead of ignoring and minimising COVID-19 and preventative measures, the government must understand the realities of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and apply prevention strategies that are most effective. The government must understand that COVID-19 is spread primarily through the air and vaccines alone do not prevent transmissions or severe disease.² COVID-19 is a new disease that cannot be underestimated, especially when there is no solid understanding of its true nature. The current research points to a grim reality. COVID-19 cannot be characterised by its acute phase, which to many might feel like a mild flu. Alarming, up to one in five people (both adults and children) can have persistent symptoms and develop Long COVID.³⁻⁵ COVID-19 is capable of damaging multiple organs, including the brain, heart, blood vessels, lungs, digestive tract, liver, kidneys, and reproductive organs.⁶ There are no clear explanations for Long COVID but the main hypothesised pathophysiological mechanisms include viral reservoir, gut microbiome dysbiosis, endothelial dysfunction, autoimmunity, and inflammation.⁶ Moreover, every infection increases a person's chance of developing Long COVID-19 because the damage is cumulative.⁶ Anyone is at risk of developing Long COVID, especially if they continue to be reinfected.

Due to the gaps and inadequacies of our public health system, I have tirelessly researched COVID-19 and effective mitigation strategies to keep my loved ones and myself safe. I have also shared my knowledge with my workplace and with communities. In November 2023, I personally started a COVID-19 [REDACTED] to help local communities prepare for a safer holiday season, as the COVID-19 wave was expected to peak over Christmas. With a group of COVID-conscious volunteers, I partnered with a [REDACTED] to provide educational seminars and informational brochures based on the latest research, in English, Chinese and Spanish, and distributed hundreds of P2/N95 masks and RATs. I believe it is vital to resource the public, especially vulnerable groups, with the knowledge and tools needed to effectively live through this pandemic.

Current research indicates that there are many vital components that are missing in our current health response measures for COVID-19. Below are my recommendations:

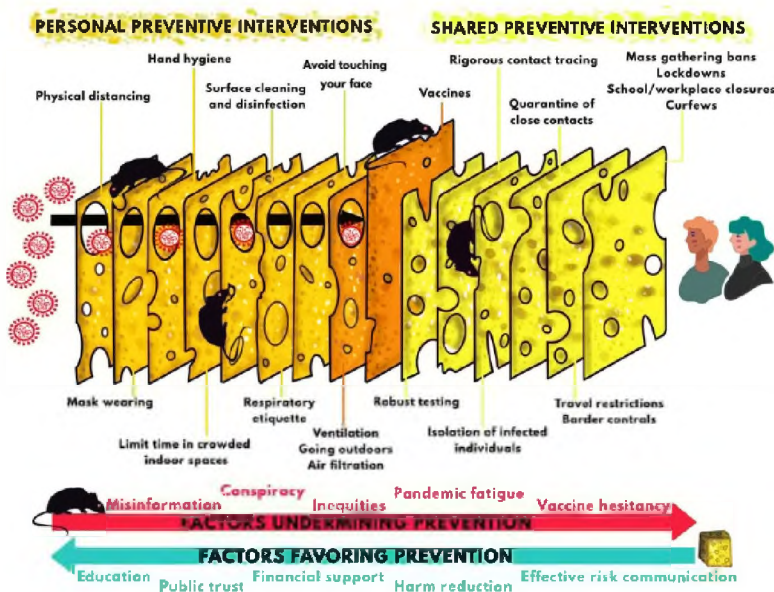
Recommendation One: A multilayered approach to prevention

Together, layers of protection can help reduce the spread of COVID-19. There is no single perfect approach, and the government needs to prioritise COVID-19 prevention in a comprehensive manner that promotes both personal preventive interventions and shared preventive interventions. In Figure 1, several examples in a layered approach are depicted.

Figure 1

The Emmentaler Cheese Respiratory Pandemic Defense Model

EMMENTALER CHEESE RESPIRATORY PANDEMIC DEFENSE MODEL



Note. This model depicts the multilayered preventative interventions for COVID-19 and the factors that either favour or undermine prevention. From Escandón et al., 2021.⁷

Recommendation Two: Resourcing communities with knowledge and effective tools

Our government can help people make informed decisions and maintain safer lifestyles by using harm reduction policies and practices and provide accurate information and effective tools for COVID-19 prevention and management. In my personal and professional life, I have observed many people who were genuinely concerned about COVID-19 and made active attempts in preventing transmission, but were not well-equipped due to a lack of knowledge and/or funds.

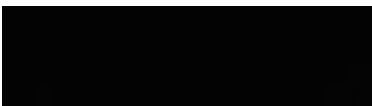
High quality masks are one of the most effective tools that should be made available and accessible to the public. In particular, P2/N95 respirator masks offer one of the highest levels of protection, especially in situations where others are not wearing a mask to prevent potential transmission.⁸ N95 masks can also be reused for many hours until they are broken or dirty.⁹ On the other hand, the government cannot, in good faith, continue to recommend generic 3-ply surgical face masks or cloth masks as effective protection against COVID-19. These masks have poorer filters and do not offer a good seal, risking significant air leaks.¹⁰ While any mask is better than none, fitted and good quality masks make a significant difference and are generally more comfortable to wear. Educating the public and destigmatising the correct use of P2/N95 masks would help people adopt a simple yet effective form of personal protection for the current and future pandemics. The reusable and durable nature of P2/N95 masks also makes them cost effective, better for the environment, and reduces the chance of mask shortages for frontline workers. The government should also consider providing free P2/N95 masks to the public as a pandemic essential.

Other important health measures should also be made free and/or affordable and accessible to the public. These include free PCR testing sites accessible without a GP referral, free RATs, and supports for families, schools, businesses, and healthcare settings to implement HEPA air purification and better ventilation in shared spaces where infectious aerosols can linger.

Final words

I appreciate the opportunity to make this submission for a healthier and more sustainable future in the face of the current and future pandemics. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

Yours sincerely,



References

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