

Hello. My name is [REDACTED]. I was a teacher. I have [REDACTED], one of whom is in daycare and a [REDACTED] in aged care. My [REDACTED], a formerly spry and healthy [REDACTED] died of the virus. I have a [REDACTED] that makes me vulnerable to COVID. I acquired a [REDACTED] after my first covid infection.

I have witnessed the year we almost completely irradiated airborne illnesses with only masks and good messaging. I remember when we wore masks in shared spaces, and had easy access to tests, when people were supported to stay home when sick and the government provided clear messaging about how important it was to look after our community.

Life was normal, except COVID and RSV and the flu were all in very very low circulation. The population was healthier, happier and felt more connected to each other. I thought we were going to normalise smaller classes and outdoor learning.

But sadly, we decided to ignore a dangerous infectious disease instead. Now, for the first time in the antibiotic era, an infectious disease is a leading cause of death for Australians.

I saw the messaging clearly change from “we are all in this together” to “you're on your own. You do you”. All the structural supports necessary to enable us to look after our neighbours and communities were very slowly eroded with minimal announcement, until one day there were not even masks in health care for the most vulnerable.

My family's world got smaller and smaller. Things that used to be safe became dangerous. Without isolation payments, some people were forced to work while infectious. Without timely updates, we had no idea how much of the virus was circling. Without PCRs, I couldn't even take steps to protect myself if my [REDACTED] became infected. RATs are much less sensitive than PCRs and so my risk of exposure while waiting for an accurate RAT result is astronomical compared to PCRs. Furthermore, my [REDACTED] could tolerate a PCR from a trained medical provider very well. They were quick and painless and I only had to mask for a day before we got an accurate response.

Now, while relying on RATs, it is enormously difficult and distressing for her and myself and we have to test over multiple days which only prolongs the misery. Even worse, we still can't rely on the results as much as we could PCRs and they are an added expense at a time when money is tight for many families. The choice to take away PCRs has done a lot of damage, physically, financially and emotionally.

Previously, there had been enough data available to make an informed choice and my family would take more risks when COVID was in a lull. Now, we are in the middle of a wave and I have no access to any information that would help me determine which activities are safe. My choices are to risk death for a night of caroling, or have my [REDACTED] miss out on Christmas experiences.

For me, protecting my [REDACTED] is of the utmost importance.

The current medical advice that the government receives, particularly from ATAGI, is woefully out of step with most international vaccine advisory bodies, the WHO, the CDC as well as the vaccine manufacturers themselves. ATAGI are failing the children of Australia and as an advisory body, they simply aren't fit for purpose and should be disbanded.

The CDC recommended that everyone aged 6 months or older should receive the new vaccine. Covid has mutated so much that the old vaccines are ineffective. The WHO has given the new Novavax Emergency Use Listing status. Yet Australia has a bizarrely restrictive eligibility criteria for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and ATAGI hasn't even looked at Novavax yet. The lack of urgency around a vaccine that has been given Emergency Use Listing is astonishing.

Furthermore, the advice that it is not necessary to vaccinate under 5s is blatantly incorrect and dangerous. We can now see pediatric hospitalization surging globally as a direct result of immune dysfunction caused by COVID.

The kids are not alright!

We can see with our own eyes - our children are getting sicker and sicker. Every round of COVID is worse than the last, and before they have a chance to properly recover, they get a new illness which takes them longer to recover from. I am sure you are aware of the mountain of evidence rising about the ways that COVID damages the immune system. I can only add that, anecdotally, in all my years of teaching, I have never seen so many children so sick for so long.

Yet ATAGI refuses Australian parents the one tool that could give some protection to children too young to mask. ATAGI are either not engaging with emerging science, or they have bought into the illogical, unscientific and dangerous fallacy of immunity debt.

Immunity debt has no medical science studies behind it. It is a rudimentary hypothesis with a great deal of robust evidence that invalidates it. Anyone still talking about immunity debt is either woefully out of their depth or being deliberately misleading.

Furthermore, the advice given to government from Australia's Chief Medical Officer, and especially the advice given by Dr [REDACTED] to the Queensland government is completely incorrect. They have even on occasion spouted anti-vax talking points, which I find greatly concerning at a time when vaccination rates are dropping.

We seem to be haphazardly pursuing herd immunity through infection. This is something that has been repeatedly proven to be impossible. The virus mutates too fast and leaves people more likely to be reinfected - not less.

Mild infections are not safe. I have personal experience with how a mild case affected my [REDACTED]. Prior to COVID, I was the picture of health. I was [REDACTED] and a [REDACTED]. I am too young to have to worry constantly about [REDACTED] but that has become my reality as a result of our Let-it-rip approach.

I have had to change careers and will most likely home-school my [REDACTED] out if sheer necessity. I don't want to do this, as I think schools provide a rich environment for learning. However, as things currently stand, schools are completely unsafe. Public education has been made functionally inaccessible for high-risk families.

I loved my job as a teacher. I was passionate and talented and devoted to the job. I had to leave the job I loved because of the safety risk. It was too dangerous without any kind of mitigations in place. As a result of the decisions by National Cabinet to remove protections coupled with public health messaging encouraging people to get and spread sickness, it became impossible to do my job without risking my life.

Whenever I see a news article about the teaching shortages, I know one ingredient in the crisis is that so many teachers made the same decision I did.

My suggestion for attracting more teachers back into the profession is to stop treating their lives as disposable. Simple tools like ventilation and air filters and a public education campaign would greatly improve our situation. Bring back easy access PCRs and Isolation payments so that families can look after each other when infected and our collective risk is reduced even further.

The Federal Health department could improve Public Health messaging across the board by being honest. I would say most of the general public are completely unaware of the severity of COVID.

They don't know that covid-induced cognitive impairment is why so many more kids are struggling at school now. People should understand these things. People deserve full information to make choices about their own safety, and their children's safety.

My suggestions for making schools safer for all children would also help the teacher retention crisis and the growing number of children and families experiencing school refusal.

We need to combat presenteeism in all industries but especially in schools. Sick children should be at home getting better, not miserable and struggling and infecting their classmates at school. Staying home when sick should be normalised and encouraged. Families would benefit from structural support like improvements to carers leave to facilitate this.

COVID should be a notifiable disease again, and families who are exposed should be encouraged to tests. Schools could provide free RATs tests when there has been an exposure. Unhindered access to PCRs would be even better. Families with vulnerable members would greatly appreciate the chance to be able to limit household spread. Currently we don't even get a fighting chance to protect each other.

Flexible and remote learning should be readily available and integrated into the state school system. This would allow families experiencing school refusal or that have children who are medically vulnerable to still safely participate in school. It would also enable children who are still contagious but over the uncomfortable symptoms of COVID to seamlessly and safely participate in lessons. Teachers who are medically vulnerable or who are leaving the profession to avoid COVID and Long COVID would be attracted to a remote work option. Remote school would allow them to participate in school and work without risking their lives.

This would also decrease staff and student absences and ameliorate learning loss.

Schools should have concrete guidelines for clear air, CO2 monitors and suitable HEPA air filters in every room. There should be professional learning on how to use these and why they are important. There are countless studies about how air quality affects learning and the benefits of clean air are numerous.

Outdoor learning has been proven to increase concentration, engagement and resilience in children. It is a good thing to encourage schools to provide. The fact that it also reduces disease spread is a wonderful bonus. While some money was provided for this, it was an insufficient amount and based around application rather than need. I would suggest that a blanket approach, so that all schools are retrofitted to have clean air and outdoor learning spaces is a better option.

Schools are a hotbed of infection. They are where our most vulnerable and precious children are congregating. They are crucial for the healthy functioning of society and for building a better future. If the Australian government allocated more resources to improving air quality and making schools safe and accessible, it would go a long way towards improving children's health and their well-being. It could enhance learning and offer pathways to children who are currently slipping through the cracks. It could reduce the amount of teachers leaving the profession and even attract some back. It would alleviate pressure on our struggling healthcare system by reducing the amount of illness in the community overall.

We could have a better, brighter and healthier future.

Surely that is worth it.