
To: COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel (CRIP)

From: Ryan Franz

Date: Wednesday, 8 November 2023

Terms of reference: International policies to support Australians at home and abroad (including international border closures, and securing vaccine supply deals with international partners for domestic use in Australia)

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make an individual submission to CRIP, it is something I had greatly hoped would happen and I applaud the Commonwealth Government (the Government) for establishing this independent panel to ultimately improve Australia's preparedness in the future.

My name is Ryan Franz, I came to Australia in [REDACTED] from [REDACTED] as a student and became a citizen in [REDACTED]. After a few years abroad to study and travel, I returned to Sydney in [REDACTED] to start my career. I lived in Sydney from then until late 2021, when the events outlined below, forced a change my now wife and I wished we didn't have to make.

Acknowledgements

I would like to make this submission acknowledging the following realities that hold true, despite my personal experience:

1. I cannot begin to appreciate the challenges and complexities of managing a global pandemic from a Federal Government's perspective. I do not approach this submission being critical with perfect 20/20 historical vision. I believe most Federal and State workers tried their best under very dynamic and stressful circumstances, and for the most part, I am thankful for their work that will probably never fully be appreciated; and
2. My experience sits alongside, not ahead of, many other Australians that endured a very challenging pandemic period

Submission

In February 2021, after a run of bad health, my mother who lived in [REDACTED] informed me that she had been diagnosed with [REDACTED]. The Panel members would probably know that [REDACTED] is a muscular degenerative disease with no cure. Typically, people pass away between 3-5 years from diagnosis but there are outliers on both sides of that range. This was a terrible shock, but my wife and I had hoped that her condition progress would be slow enough for us to see her.

By mid-2021 her health had deteriorated more rapidly than expected. She was largely bed bound and being fed through a tube. However, we were able to share some exciting news that we were expecting our first child (a boy) and were engaged. Again, we hoped this would give her the strength to stay with us for a bit longer so we could see her. But her health continued to deteriorate.

At this stage of the pandemic, we were all aware of the restrictions put on travel, which at the time seemed to have no end in sight. Similar terrible stories were emerging of people unable to see dying or sick family members across state lines, never mind in other countries. For the most part, we understood that the world

was largely in the same boat and wrestling with the challenges of protecting their populations and health systems.

However, I became aware of numerous people I personally knew who were travelling internationally for work, somehow accessing quarantine and assuring their place back in the country. This is not conjecture, this is a fact, supported by similar examples of other people I personally knew who were afforded the same opportunity to travel internally, across State borders. Further compounding this sense of double standard, Australia became the country for some celebrities and high-profile individuals to fly in and out of, to see COVID out in relative safety. This was widely documented in the Australian media, with one particularly galling example being the then Prime Minister's evangelical pastor mate (██████████) flying all around the US preaching the good word (I assume he got back into Australia with no dramas). In summary we had two cohorts of people, people of economic value to Australia and people of status value to Australia moving freely into and out of the country.

At the time I was aware of the Compassionate Travel Exemption option the Government had established, and so I made a submission attaching a letter from my mother's Neurologist outlining her condition and grave prognosis (Rider 1 – doctors name redacted for confidentiality). My belief was that given some people were moving around globally for relatively superficial reasons, having a terminally ill direct relative who was on death's door, would qualify me for compassionate travel. Clearly not, I received the attached, heartless email, from the Government (Rider 2). I was absolutely floored – to have my application rejected, despite my circumstances, and for this rejection to be delivered in such a manner had a mental, emotional and physical impact on me that I cannot articulate in words – an impact that I am still grappling and struggling with on a daily basis. Please do not underestimate the ramifications of this decision and how it was managed.

I was now in a situation whereby I had to weigh up two options:

- Travel to ██████████ to see my dying mother, with no guarantee of a way to return, knowing that this may result in missing the birth of my son; or
- Stay in Australia and say goodbye to my mother via Zoom.

To say that these options were troubling and unsatisfactory is an extreme understatement.

However, in August/September 2021, after much consideration, and incredible support from my employer another option, albeit more drastic, presented itself. We decided to uproot our lives and move to live in the ██████████ where I could travel freely to ██████████. Within weeks of making this decision, my employer had approved my transfer, arranged shipping and organised me a ██████████ work visa. And as if the Government wasn't making it hard enough to travel in the first place, we then had to get travel exemptions approved to leave Australia, incurring more costs including lawyers. When time was of the utmost and urgent importance, this added another process, more cost and time to our departure.

My mother died approximately 2 weeks before we departed for the ██████████

Our family was devastated, and as a direct result of the treatment received at the hands of the Government, we stuck with our decision to leave Australia to live in the ██████████. This was also influenced by our need to reconnect with ██████████ based family and it still afforded me the ability to return to ██████████ to bury my mother. So, with a 7 month pregnant wife and a dog we departed Australia and lived in the ██████████ for 2 years. If I am honest, I cannot tell you how incredibly let down I felt by the Government's handling of COVID at that stage.

The result is that we endured enormous family anguish by being 'trapped' in Australia with an imminently dying parent, and so uprooted our entire life to the ██████████ with all the physical and emotional effort that requires, and spent tens of thousands of dollars in doing so.

Considerations for CRIP

The civic contract we have with Government is that we act as good citizens (law-abiding, tax paying, etc.) and Government works for its citizens to provide the services, infrastructure and processes for those communities to flourish. Notwithstanding the unprecedented nature of COVID and the many competing priorities for the Government, this element of its COVID response was a categorical failure and my view is that this stemmed from the fact that strategic action in the first year of the pandemic was not swift enough (paraphrasing the PM: *'It's not a race to get vaccines'*), which backlogged the entire response and left Australian trailing the developed world (even the developing world). This cost citizens including me, time they did not have to spare.

My suggestions for the future readiness as it relates to *International policies to support Australians at home and abroad (including international border closures, and securing vaccine supply deals with international partners for domestic use in Australia)*:

1. **(Prioritise the needs of citizens and residents (within and Australia and abroad) who have genuine special circumstances - not people based on their status, influence or prominence).**
Civics over status. It is wholly unacceptable that a person can't access a dying relative or that families are separated for months/years if their circumstances warrant proper consideration, while 'connected' business people or famous individuals have freedoms that others don't. Means tested (based on evidence) processes should be established;
2. **(Quarantine)** If the Government is going to be wedded to a quarantine system in the circumstance of another pandemic, then it needs to be ready to implement this system. I would have sat in a ventilated shipping container for 2 weeks if I knew I could leave Australia with a guaranteed quarantine slot upon my return. We built a sophisticated track and trace system within months, surely we can establish quarantine systems with relatively short notice or have plans in place to establish them efficiently;
3. **(Special Channels)** If you are going to offer channels to access special consideration for travel then actually have them function properly. I suspect that the true breakdown in this function was the complete mismanagement of the quarantine system. But no amount of explaining is going convince me that seeing a terminally ill parent that has been given months, if not weeks, to live does not fall under the Compassionate consideration category. If you are going to offer hope then deliver on it. As naïve as it sounds, this was personally very damaging in my trust in the Government;
4. **(The Federal Government)** In very special cases the Federal Government needs to be able to centralise decision making and control the situation unilaterally. The political arguments over who was responsible for the borders and quarantine was so pathetic to listen to. Your citizens will respect control and decisiveness over blame games played out in the media. In these times we don't care about politics, we care about net effective outcomes.

Thank you for making this submission possible, hopefully we never have to use any of the suggestions put forward to CRIP but I hope that as a nation, we can respond far more effectively in future if needed.

Thank you,

Ryan Franz

