

COVID-19 RESPONSE SUBMISSION

November 2023

Risk Management

Dr Coatsworth, who was Deputy Chief Medical Officer from 23 January 2021 and as such was a senior health advisor to the Australian government, advocated in an article in the Australian Financial Review on 7 September 2023 that "excess deaths" caused by COVID-19 are an acceptable tradeoff for better economic performance. I strongly disagree with this approach, which is at odds with risk management in other aspects of our society.

I have spent a career in hazardous industrial chemicals, where we design and operate facilities where one safety standard is a risk to an individual in the general community of less than 1 death per a million years. Overseas, the nuclear power industry operates under similar regulations. I cannot believe that Coatsworth could advocate for one risk standard for COVID while society demands an entirely different standard for other activities. Perhaps medical training, while aimed at medical aspects at an individual level, does not provide an acceptable basis for community-wide risk management.

To expand this beyond COVID, where for a long time the death toll was at least 10 times the road toll, we have a comprehensive set of vehicle and road design standards which address many safety risks with the objective of increasing safety. Examples include the wearing of seat belts, use of airbags and provision of crash barriers. I have never heard it suggested that we lower our standards in order to benefit the overall economy while accepting increased road deaths.

The industrial chemicals sector uses very detailed statistical analysis of situations and equipment to determine the most economic means of reducing risk to the community. I strongly recommend a similar approach to identify options to minimise risks resulting from pandemics. I would expect such an approach to recommend adopting technology solutions such as:

- better ventilation of public buildings, hospitals, schools and public transport
- use of HEPA filters, particularly where large numbers of people are present
- air quality monitoring in real time
- the wearing of masks in some situations

Surely such an approach is better than not addressing the more obvious causes of COVID transmission and blindly accepting a higher death toll.

COVID is still with us and will surely come again in a different form. These measures should be implemented now to reduce the risk of infection and the ongoing costs of long COVID at both the individual level, to the health system and to the economy generally.

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