

COVID -19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

SUBMISSION

Introduction

My name is Anne Heath Mennell and I live on the shores of [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]. My submission is written from the perspective of a private citizen. I have no medical or science expertise so my submission is focused on my personal experience of that time, in the hope that my views will assist in improving our response to future pandemics or similar emergencies.

Comments

Early stages

In early 2020 I was 71 years old with a pre-existing condition which reduced my [REDACTED]. This put me in two high risk categories. I will never forget the fear as the virus spread around the world, people were dying in their thousands with hospitals overwhelmed. Drone vision of graves being dug in New York City is still vivid.

When the virus reached Australia my fear intensified, not helped by several serious, early mistakes, made as authorities scrambled to deal with the unprecedented situation. I am retired so I was able to stay at home as much as possible and avoid crowded places while public health departments tried to source face-masks, hand sanitizers, PPE for health workers and put in place other preventative measures. It became apparent that Australia did not make many of these vital items, nor did we have emergency stockpiles so there were severe shortages. Given the time since the last pandemic, this is understandable to a point, but it did not help to stem the fears of vulnerable communities.

It is obvious that we need to review supply chains of vital products, invest in our own manufacturing capacity, wherever possible, and maintain emergency stocks to help deal with future disasters.

Quarantine

In the early stages, when numbers of cases and deaths were rising rapidly, the use of isolation and quarantine to try to slow the spread was really important for public confidence. Unfortunately, mistakes were made here too as authorities had to make and implement difficult decisions with inadequate information, resources, experience and facilities.

In the future, we need to have established protocols in place which enable citizens overseas to be repatriated quickly and for people to be quarantined where necessary. The state government should be commended for ensuring that homeless people were provided with safe, albeit temporary, accommodation. By allowing indigenous leaders to manage their communities in their own ways, governments helped to protect vulnerable, remote communities.

Future quarantine plans should include frontline health-care workers who may not wish to put their families at risk. At least Victoria now has a quarantine facility, which should be maintained so that it can be re-opened quickly, if needed, either for quarantine or during other disasters.

Lockdowns and Border Closures

Lockdowns became very divisive in Victoria and I should preface my remarks by clarifying that I live in a rural area, own my own home, don't have school-age children and was not separated from close family. Our experience of lockdowns was not as severe as for those in metro Melbourne.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to see what the government could have done differently to try to reduce the spread of the virus at a time when there were no treatments for those who contracted it, no vaccines to reduce the chances of someone becoming positive and deaths were increasing rapidly.

Australia's federal structure made border closures unprecedented and politically divisive. There were tragic stories of people separated from dying loved ones and huge difficulties for border communities such as Albury-Wodonga. Australia's size means long supply chains across state borders. There was much confusion and anxiety, especially when borders were closed with almost no warning. Again, mistakes were made but it is hard to see what else governments could have done, at a time when stopping or slowing the spread of the virus was the priority.

Any loss of civil liberties was temporary and necessary to ensure a whole-of-community response to a devastating, life and death situation. If such a situation was to recur, we need to have clear strategies and frameworks in place so that public health officials, politicians, essential industries, transport, emergency organisations etc. all know what needs to be done, who will do it and how it will be done.

Communication and Coordination

In extraordinary times, reliable information is vital. Victoria's premier gave press conferences every day, giving updates and explanations. He has been strongly criticised by some people for his handling of the pandemic. Certainly, mistakes were made and issues mishandled but I am not sure that anyone else could have done anything different or better.

Victoria was criticised for doing things differently from other states. Given the many differences between the states this seems sensible but the establishment of the National Cabinet was a very good move. Arguments between Commonwealth and state governments and between state and territory governments could be discussed and decisions made and coordinated for the good of the whole country, with politics minimised.

An apolitical National Cabinet should be established at an early stage of any future situation to minimise competition and political posturing and to maximise cooperation and coordination for the national good.

Vaccinations

Once vaccines became available, supply couldn't keep up with demand and Australia had to make decisions which, in hindsight, might not have been the best ones. Obtaining and then distributing vaccines could have been handled better and were beset by misinformation and disinformation campaigns. I can't really offer any suggestions on how this matter could be better handled in the future, other than having the capacity to develop and produce vaccines ourselves and having clear

priorities in terms of distribution to vulnerable groups such as people in aged care. Addressing hostile commentary should be a specific review area for the Inquiry.

Non-health responses

I commend governments for providing financial assistance to employees and organisations during lockdowns. However, the discovery that some companies used government funds to increase profits and were unwilling to return un-needed funds was shocking. The law should be amended to ensure this never happens again.

The exclusion of universities from financial support schemes and the treatment of overseas students was ideological discrimination by the then federal Government which should never be repeated.

Conclusion

Many mistakes were made and, undoubtedly, some things could have been handled better. I believe that almost everyone was trying to do their best in unprecedented circumstances, working in the dark in a very high-stakes situation.

If I had caught Covid in 2020, I may not have survived. When I did test positive, it was with a less virulent strain, I was fully vaccinated and had access to anti-virals. I experienced only a mild infection, with no ill effects. It could have been very different. The actions taken in 2020 and 2021 bought us time to develop vaccines and save lives. I am very grateful.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Inquiry. I hope that its recommendations will ensure that we are better prepared for the next challenge.

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