

Submission concerning the Qld government's health response to COVID-19

Queensland is in a difficult phase for managing the COVID health response. People could be suffering compliance fatigue and starting to relax the essential practices around hand washing and social distancing. It is therefore essential that future restrictions are fair and consistent in order to ensure public cooperation.

Before suggesting some improvements to the government's performance to date, I'd like to acknowledge the bipartisanship that Australians have witnessed in the work of the National Cabinet. The lack of sniping has been a boon to people's trust in the democratic process. It's to be hoped that this continues.

That said, the Queensland government has performed well in not caving into pressure from other states and the federal government to re-open borders before deeming it safe to do so.

The Qld government has done well with regular communication via media conferences. However, it would be helpful to hear the reporters' questions in order to fully understand the answers. While I appreciate that this is not your direct responsibility, liaison between your communications people and the media would be useful as being able to hear both the question and the response is essential in ensuring that the public fully understands important messages.

Going forward, there are a few lessons to be learned from the last few months. I refer to three issues: inconsistent regulations, privacy, and flawed reasoning.

Inconsistency

One example: Why were jet skiers and fishing people not allowed to pursue their activities where social distancing *is* possible? (I engage in neither of these activities.) What was the thinking behind this: that it was best to ban all sports rather than apparently 'favouring' some above others? Surely people are sufficiently mature to see the benefit of relaxing different activities at different times. The physical and mental health benefits of exercise are well known and allowing access to certain sports earlier than others would have done something positive for the physical and mental wellbeing of at least some sections of the community, reducing the mental health load elsewhere.

A further example: It seemed illogical to allow kids to go to school where social distancing is very difficult but restrict them from going to parks where there's far more space.

Privacy

While acknowledging that the COVIDSafe App is a federal initiative, it is in the interests of the states that this work. Unfortunately, it hasn't. People reluctant to download it often cite privacy concerns. Do they have the same concerns when filling out the 'attendance sheets' at cafes and restaurants?

Requirements vary from name/phone number/address to just name and phone number. Previous or subsequent customers can readily scan the list and see other customers' private details. How is this less privacy-invading than the app? Downloading the app needs to be incentivized. Surely it would be reasonable to allow people *with* the app to enter restaurants etc. by displaying their app on entry and to require paper form completion only from those *without* the app.

Also, it is unfair to put the burden of tracing COVID cases onto private businesses via these attendance sheets. Tracing COVID cases is the government's responsibility.

Flawed reasoning

Clearly, big decisions are being made within tight timelines and in such circumstances citizens are willing to make some allowances. However, public patience will wane if certain decisions seem to make little sense.

An example (in addition to the sports example and kids at school examples above): The Queensland government's initial plan to waive residential rents was sensibly reversed to being a deferral of rents. This reversal would not have been necessary if all sides of the issue had been considered in the first place. Too many 'back-flips' of this sort erode public confidence and need to be avoided. All decisions need to pass through a rigorous devil's advocate process before announcement and implementation.

Another example: Setting the same maximum number of customers for all restaurants lacked logic, given the enormous variation in the space capacity of different venues.

If Jo/e citizen can immediately spot flawed thinking in a government instruction, then processes have failed. We need the thinking processes behind policy decisions to be rigorous and to work logically and fairly every time so that public confidence and cooperation can be assured.

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