Why we must lock out COVID-19 right now

Urgent action

Richard Holden

As the COVID-19 crisis continues its irreversible march towards a global pandemic, Australia is being almost completely reactive. And the economic costs of being reactive are likely to be much larger than the costs of being decisive.

As of yesterday, there were 19 confirmed cases in Australia, including those deaths. We have had no new cases from China, India and South Korea. Brazil, however, has locked down an entire state of its population. Australia only has “advanced screening measures” for those flying in from Italy. People coming to Australia from Italy are asked a few questions and have their temperatures taken. Really? We are not putting Italy nearly seriously enough.

Getting ahead of the crisis and acting decisively might look like this: Australia would lock down its borders— not from some countries, but from every country—right now and for an initial period of one month. Australian citizens returning from overseas would have to go into mandatory, government-approved quarantine for 14 days. Foreign nationals would be immediately banned from entry. Of course, no one would be able to spend the virus to multiple other people, and they would spread it to multiple other people, the number of those infected grows like compound interest. But not faster and with much less pleasant results.

Unlike other countries, the world’s largest is still in control over its borders, and this is the time to take control. By dramatically limiting the number of infections coming into Australia we can, if we act now, slow the spread of the virus in Australia. But given the number of cases already present we also need to act decisively to slow community transmission domestically. That likely means shutting all schools and universities for four weeks. This would cause significant disruption, but could be achieved by simply moving holiday periods forward and contemporising a different school calendar for the rest of the year if the threat can be contained.

Businesses will need to expand the capacity for as many workers as possible to work remotely. This isn’t possible for everyone, but the more we can slow the spread of the virus, the more options might become radicar, but we’ve got to try to do it anyway.

Japan has closed schools—but not Italy. Italy has locked down a quarter of the country— but not China. Shut down Wuhan—Saltoan.

Why are we, as a country, waiting to experience all of the pain of those containment measures without getting any of the benefits of those measures? For the pain, economic and social, will come. The government needs to innovate a stimulus package targeted at the most affected sectors of the economy, universities and tourism. That will have to happen, and it will be a success. But the government really needs to accept that, to prevent mass deaths and social disorder, we need to acknowledge an economic shock to the economy worth of 400 billion.


Fear has gone viral and that is certainly a worry

Uncertain prognosis

Les Coleman

Coronavirus gives insight into how the world has low, but high-frequency, potential. My research has already identified an in-grated way of doing things, and the recent wave of coronavirus cases, and with it the news of more than one infection— they have equal merit. When previous research shows how the virus is spreading, it is beginning to become.

Unfortunately, the news of stories is worse with more clicks and funding. In the case of the coronavirus outbreak, there is no shortage of false stories and authoritative warnings on the case, but what do we actually know? First is that global pandemics are infrequent: they occur only very few years, and the last was 2009 Spanish flu. Predictions of low-frequency events even have a high rate of false positives. Assume global pandemics occur every century and expert pain have 90 percent accuracy in predicting them in any year.

There are hours, not days, for the government to act decisively. It’s a shocking thing to contemplate, but the only option we have is to forestall Australia. John Howard famously hoped Australia would feel “comfortable and reduced.” It’s worth remembering that, as prime minister, was willing to act decisively to help achieve that. He said his decisions would be guided by the phrase in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre, and he did so economically by introducing the Goods and Services Tax. There is a different situation now, one that is paradoxical and acting decisively when it’s necessary.

A Beijing test station is disinfected. China hit a peak with the 2009 Spanish flu. Predictions of low-frequency events even have a high rate of false positives. Assume global pandemics occur every century and expert pain have 90 percent accuracy in predicting them in any year.

We do not know enough about modern disease as health researchers have failed us.


Page 1 of 1

AFR
Tuesday 10 March 2020
www.afri.com/The Australian Financial Review

PLAGUE OR JUST A PAN?*

Closing Australia’s borders and schools for a month is the only way to get ahead of an infection that’s growing exponentially, urges Richard Holden. Statistics say that a pandemic is improbable and drastic action would be an unjustified economic disaster, argues Les Coleman.

**AFR**