

# Vaccinated merit different rules

Rather than cut overseas arrivals, we should act on the fact people who've been vaccinated are a very low risk.

Peter McIntyre



I am in lockdown in Sydney with uncertain prospects of returning to my wife and youngest son in Dunedin after using the travel bubble to come to Australia.

I am lucky to have seen my daughter, my three grandchildren and my son via Brisbane to visit to my 94-year-old mother and two brothers. I'm also lucky to be a fully vaccinated health professional locking down in comfort with my fully vaccinated daughter and son-in-law. But my background in international immunisation policy and research makes two things clear.

First, in the pre-vaccine world to the end of 2020, the three most prominent zero-COVID countries - Australia, New Zealand and China - had the best health and economic outcomes in the world.

Second, the flip side is that what in 2021 looks like great success against COVID-19 in highly vaccinated countries, such as Israel and Britain, looks scary in Australia and New Zealand - especially the Delta variant. This scariness is causing some political leaders to demand that overseas arrivals be reduced by 50 per cent and hundreds of millions of dollars be spent on quarantine facilities in isolated areas. But does this represent the best risk-to-benefit balance in the post-vaccine world?

Yes, the Delta variant has much higher infectiousness - some experts have suggested Delta represents "peak fitness" for the virus - but not greater

severity. But this is in the unvaccinated. Risks are very different in vaccinated people, with striking recent evidence from the NSW outbreak.

First, from an infected traveller from Sydney visiting New Zealand who had received one vaccine dose - he transmitted only to his wife despite visiting numerous locations over five days. Second, among 30 attendees at a Sydney birthday party, all were infected except the seven who were vaccinated. These anecdotes fit with international evidence of much lower acquisition and transmission of the Delta variant by the vaccinated and retained protection against severe disease if infected.

While acknowledging many positive steps in Phase A of Australia's COVID-19 response, announced on Friday, the 50 per cent reduction in overseas arrivals and the more stringent quarantine for those that do come here fails to take account of a post-vaccine world.

Only the baby step of piloting a different approach for vaccinated people is allowed, while thousands

desperate to return home have the ground cut from under them.

An evidence-based approach to COVID exposure risk in vaccinated people is needed now, not in six

months. Case studies showing how vaccination status is disregarded include the Queensland case of the fully vaccinated couple precluded from seeing their premature infant despite multiple negative COVID tests, even in full PPE, and that in NSW fully vaccinated ambulance personnel attending a call from a COVID-positive person in isolation - and wearing full PPE - were required to isolate for 14 days.

Both examples represent risk aversion which, especially when applied to fully vaccinated people, is extreme and not justified by evidence. Rather than halving

international arrivals, a simple and much less damaging approach to reducing risk would be to require all international arrivals to have verification of receiving two doses of any vaccine approved in Australia. That could allow arrivals to increase, not decrease. Why not restrict at least some flights to the vaccinated?

Vaccine access is such that being fully vaccinated is relatively easy to achieve in most countries aspiring returnees are coming from, and such people would be highly motivated to source a vaccine and comply with testing regimes, making anxiety about quarantine capacity unjustified. As the national strategy states, this could ease further once Australia reaches high vaccine coverage.

Australia has world-leading capacity for digital certification of vaccination domestically, so it is encouraging to see cabinet say it wants to take advantage of this. It should be no more onerous than current QR code requirements.

Australia must prioritise vaccination of adults at highest risk of severe disease, with the aim of reaching British benchmarks of more than 90 per cent. As availability improves, reaching high vaccine coverage among other adults will be greatly assisted by them seeing tangible benefits from their fully vaccinated status. Vaccination of those younger than 16 needs further consideration.

Fully vaccinated people, whether they be international arrivals or Australian residents, merit different treatment. For this to happen, leaders across the political spectrum must respond to the strong evidence available by moving to new risk calibrations appropriate for the post-vaccine world now, not in six months.

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# We're teens running amok over 'cool' Glad

Penny Flanagan



Recent scenes around Sydney have had other states wondering whether this city is actually in lockdown: crowded beach boardwalks, picnics in the park, handstands at the outdoor gym. When the sun is shining, it's business as usual in Sydney.

This is probably because, as a pandemic leader, Premier Gladys Berejiklian has been a bit like Amy Poehler's character in the movie *Mean Girls*. "There are no rules in this house," Mrs George assures her daughter's friends. "I'm not a regular mom, I'm a cool mum."

Similarly, Berejiklian has prided herself on not closing borders or imposing strict rules every time disaster looms. The vibe being: I'm not a regular premier, I'm a cool premier.

But it's not just Berejiklian, Health Minister Brad Hazzard has also contributed to the permissive parenting vibe: "Hopefully, common sense will prevail," he said at a press conference when asked about the definition of essential items. Then he made a confusing dad joke about essential oils.

But there is a flaw in this approach because Sydneysiders are like a pack of clueless teenagers. We've seen the evidence this past weekend, with everyone inventing their own lockdown rules to live by.

I had this confirmed when a friend said to me: "You can do anything you like, you just have to have a story." Meaning, you just invent something that fits the criteria and you can go on living your life as per usual. Which is probably why a lot of people cite takeaway coffee as essential. The queues on street corners are akin to communist-era Russians lining up for bread. Another friend cited going out for a custard cronut as going out for an "essential item".

Under Sydney's lockdown rules, we are allowed to leave home for exercise and, in this city, the definition of exercise is broad. I took advantage and went for an aerobic walk with a friend. There was a lot of talking but, I have to admit, not enough walking to break a sweat.

The entire population of Sydney was also there - scooters, dogs and puffer-vests abound - and for an added bonus, someone coughed in my face as we passed each other by.

Up until about a week ago, Sydney was the cool state, we were the ones with the "cool mum" who didn't close the borders and trusted us to use our own judgment. Now the plot is reaching its denouement and just like the teen clique in *Mean Girls*, we are making bad decisions. We might be about to take the entire school down with us.

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## Why not restrict some flights to the vaccinated?

# Closing schools must be a last resort

As the greater-Sydney lockdown enters its second week, there is a fair chance it won't end any time soon.

As we approach the end of the school holidays, the next big challenge is what to do about schools. If the lockdown needs to be extended, will that mean school closures and a return to remote learning? Right now education officials say that is not on the cards but Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant will not be definitive about it.

We now know that the idea circulating early in the pandemic that kids are extremely unlikely to transmit the virus was more wishful thinking than good science. The early evidence supporting that claim relied on a very small sample of households.

Recent evidence of transmission among school children in NSW makes clear that - at least with this Delta variant - kids can be a meaningful source of transmission.

Shutting down schools in April 2020 while we established effective contact-tracing and testing was clearly the right call. But that doesn't mean it was costless. Some



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kids learn quite effectively from home, some don't. There is an obvious socioeconomic skew to these costs with better-resourced families able to provide a more effective and more enjoyable home-learning environment.

And school closures are clearly bad for working parents. Their wellbeing and productivity both take a hit from trying to juggle home-schooling, working from home and household duties during a pandemic.

It is also clear that this has a negative gender skew. Women, on average, end up bearing more of these costs than men. They work harder and experience more stress but earn less. And the global evidence suggests that these effects can persist long after the lockdown is over.

Of course, closing down businesses is also costly, but that is much easier to address with

government financial compensation. And whatever you might have read, \$1 of financial support from government doesn't "cost" a dollar. It costs the economic loss from raising that dollar in taxes. Most economists think that's about 20 cents.

That's real, and it's important. But with government interest rates at record lows and debt levels also very low, it is certainly manageable and something we should see as part and parcel of any lockdown.

The adverse effects of shutting down schools are not so readily remedied - for parents or children. And this is especially true for the impact it has on gender and socioeconomic equality.

As a result, school closures should be the last line in any state's COVID-defence strategy. We should close almost every other indoor venue before we consider closing schools - and even then, we should pause before doing so.

But that also means paying attention to what this means for teachers. Some teachers may be fully vaccinated, but most will not be. Indeed, many will not even have received their first vaccine dose if

they are under 50. As the Education Minister, Sarah Mitchell, said last week, this makes it imperative to start vaccinating all teachers - young and old - as a matter of priority. And that means starting this week and, if needed, delaying the start of the school term until all NSW school teachers and school staff - or at least those in Greater Sydney - can obtain at least their first AstraZeneca or Pfizer shot.

This will be a massive effort and involve vaccinating a large number of the 88,000 teachers in NSW and 123,000 total school staff. While some number will already have been vaccinated, many will not have been.

It is therefore especially good news that the NSW government is taking steps to increase our vaccine delivery capacity - through more mass vaccination sites, GPs and pharmacies. There's no time to waste. School starts next week.

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