**Op-ed: Valuing our Health as much as our Wealth**

As the Premier of Tasmanian, Peter Gutwein, announces further easing of restrictions, there is a growing chorus from those becoming impatient with what they see as overly cautious decision making from the same health bureaucrats who kept us safe throughout the pandemic. Much of this commentary is unwarranted and is coming from special interest groups anxious to get the economy up and running as quickly as possible.

What is important is that the Premier and his appointed Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Taskforce listen, not just to those with the loudest voice, but consider a future that is inclusive of all Tasmanians.

The first piece of advice Health Consumers Tasmania offers the Premier and his Taskforce is that many in the community believe that we cannot quickly snap back to the way things were, particularly as we watch places like Victoria struggle to fully manage a possible second outbreak.

Any easing of restrictions requires strong community support and feedback indicates that many are in favour of a cautious and phased approach. They are telling Health Consumers Tasmania that “restrictions should be relaxed rather than removed in some cases” and “I think some relaxation but carefully monitored and knowing it may need to change back again” in the case of further outbreaks.

Governments also need to be careful that they do not create a two-tiered system whereby those who are more at risk from Coronavirus, for example, the elderly and those with chronic health conditions are told to stay home while others enjoy freedom of movement.

This leads us to the second piece of advice Health Consumers Tasmania would offer the Premier and his Taskforce. Many in the community have an expectation that there will be a “new normal” and that we do not automatically revert to the way things were. This is complex but worth exploring further.

Many do not realise that the way things were was not sustainable. Pre-Coronavirus, our way of living was based on spending our whole life sacrificing our individual and collective health to make money, then as we became older, we would attempt to spend that money trying to regain lost health – but this approach rarely works. For many years we have watched as increasing numbers of people present with chronic health conditions, we see a generation who for the first time may not be as healthy as their elders, and our youth suffering elevated levels of anxiety and stress never seen before. The burden this was placing on our economy, budgets, infrastructure was a cost that we could no longer afford or afford to ignore.

On the other hand, throughout the lockdown, health was given priority over everything else which has been at a cost to our individual and collective wealth. Whilst, this approach is also not sustainable, living through it does teach us some fundamentals that we need to take into a “new normal”. These leanings include:

* The technological advances gained in health during the Coronavirus do raise some red flags for Tasmanians. Any future initiatives need to focus on reducing inequalities and improved access to services for all Tasmanians, otherwise those who are less well off, or who do not own smart phones or computers will be left further behind.
* Health prevention works. People get it when they see the pending crisis loom in front of them and this awareness motivated compliance during Coronavirus that I never thought possible. The question becomes, how can we use prevention to transform the health and wellbeing of ourselves and our communities so that it will save us money down the track?
* Also, how can we translate this preventative approach into other industries and infrastructures thereby taking a longer term and whole of community approach to our decision-making?
* Can we create a work environment that offers an improved work life balance that some experienced from working at home during the Coronavirus for the first time?
* Women and young people suffered the greatest impact from job losses through Coronavirus, so it makes sense that any new initiatives should target upskilling and creating employment options for women and young people be a priority.
* The impact from the pandemic on our individual and collective mental health is yet to play out, but we do know this impact will be substantial. Strategies will be required to support individuals and communities cope, build more inclusive social infrastructures, and increased social care.
* The tourism and international education sectors were hardest hit, these therefore need to be re-energised for local consumption.
* Finally, the pandemic saw many local initiatives and community support structures appear. How can Government stimulate and further develop the soft infrastructures that the community values so much?

Our community is telling us that we need to be patient as we move into recovery mode, to rebuild our society to be one that values our individual and collective health as much as we value the wealth it produces.

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