



Building a Consumers Health Voice in Tasmania

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Omicron Outbreak

Dear Premier and Minister

Since the December 15 opening of Tasmanian borders, Tasmania has rapidly moved to a volatile and confusing phase of the pandemic, and I acknowledge the difficulties that you both face whilst managing the systems burden caused by Omicron

Health Consumers Tasmania would like to raise some important issues that we are hearing from our community of interest.

- Many in the community are confused and frightened as they lack clear information on what is required of them. They are also unclear on what the government's (State and Federal) objectives are at the moment, which makes it hard for them to support your efforts.
- We believe there is a growing number of people who feel betrayed or let down, that they believe the current policy settings are not in their best interests, nor will it keep them or their families safe from catching COVID.
- There is a large group of at-risk Tasmanians who now feel that their interests are no longer being factored into the decision-making process, and they believe they will end up bearing the greatest impact from catching Omicron.
- As a result, there is clearly a significant and growing proportion of Tasmanians who are minimising their public interactions, which is neither sustainable for them individually nor for the economy more broadly.

Health Consumers Tasmania would like to provide you with a number of options that we believe could be helpful to the Tasmanian situation.

- i. Further actions to minimise the spread of Omicron

The World Health Organization recommends that public health interventions to combat COVID cannot rely on vaccinations alone, and that all other public health control measures should be considered as required to minimise the spread of the disease. Health Consumers Tasmania believe that minimising people movements remains a highly effective and proven method to reduce the spread of COVID.

Under the current scenarios, there may come a point in Tasmania where the case load of COVID positive people will ultimately overload the hospital system as is the case in some other States, and what we have now witnessed at the NWRH.

Tasmanians waiting for elective surgeries and those on the outpatient lists should not be required to pay the price for the Omicron outbreak in Tasmania by facing further delays. Health Consumers Tasmania would like to see greater public health controls aimed to reduce the spread of COVID in place before the Government chooses to cancel these vital services.

Recommendation: The Government gives serious consideration to either

- place further restrictions on people's movement (density limits etc) before caseloads impact on the hospital system, elective surgeries and outpatient services, and
- a snap lockdown to enable the State to get ahead of the virus be considered as a possible necessary intervention if required.

ii. Rule changes

The constant rule changes are counter-intuitive to keeping Tasmanians safe and the link between the current policy framework and public health advice is less clear now than at any previous time during the pandemic.

Tasmanians don't understand the rationale of changing the close contact definition from 15 minutes to 4 hours for a variant that is more contagious – whilst the economic rationale for this change is clear, the health implications are not so clear. We note that the definition of close contact defined by the CDNA National Guidelines for Public health Units still defines a close contact as 15 minutes.

Many Tasmanians are worried that the rule change to allow essential workers of close contacts to forego isolation and return to work will ultimately accelerate the Omicron spread. This is particularly concerning for those in vulnerable settings – aged care, home community care and the disability sector, for example, this rule change will not address the trust that people have in accepting someone into their home and may have the unintended consequence that carers will be less likely to access available support for fear of bringing COVID into the home.

The Government ceasing to report high risk locations is a concern for many in the community and has undermined previous public educational efforts to track and trace, the use of the QR code and reduces the ability for people to self-manage and better prepare for COVID.

Recommendation: Consider reinstating the publication of high-risk sites so people can be better informed and better manage their health care.

Recommendation: Given Tasmanians age and health profile, we suspect that 'living with COVID' in Tasmania may require tighter definitions for close contacts and essential worker exemptions than what is used nationally. It would be wise to move away from changing close contact definitions as a strategy to prevent workforce disruptions.

iii. Testing

We acknowledge that your government is making RAT tests free to those who are required by Public Health to use them, and they will now be posted to those in regional areas – this is a good thing.

Also, given the validity of a RAT test is not the same as a PCR test and should only be used if a person is COVID symptomatic as they are not designed to pick up COVID in asymptomatic people – this is not well understood within the community.

Recommendation: The RAT tests be posted to all those who are required to use them, not just those in remote areas. Ultimately, once the State has procured sufficient stocks, the community would benefit significantly if RAT tests were made available at no cost and posted to them if they request it, regardless of where they live.

Recommendation: An education campaign on RATs, what their role is within the testing regime and how to use them properly would assist the community greatly.

iv. **Reporting**

The current public reporting of COVID cases in hospitals distinguishes between those who have current underlying medical conditions and those that don't. This can appear offensive or disparaging to those in the community who have an underlying health condition and this style of reporting makes them feel less important or less of an issue compared to the rest of the community.

Recommendation: A different way of reporting COVID hospitalisations be considered – simply report on the number of people admitted to hospital because they have COVID would suffice.

v. **Communications**

Many people don't have sufficient information to allow them to make informed decisions about their own safety and that of their families. Health Consumers Tasmania has prepared two checklists that we believe will help many Tasmanians take better control of their COVID situation.

Recommendation: Health Consumers Tasmania is available and would welcome the opportunity to support your government's communication efforts.

Health Consumers Tasmania acknowledge that the Tasmanian situation is different to other States, given we have come from a COVID zero position and therefore, the rapid increase in case numbers has had a greater emotional impact on Tasmanians. Tasmanians have been required to take a greater leap into a 'living with COVID environment', and the flow on impact this has had on our broader economy is deeper than perhaps expected.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss these and any other issues with you further and trust our suggestions or recommendations will assist with your decision making.

Yours sincerely,



Bruce Levett
Chief Executive Officer
Health Consumers Tasmania

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