

Australian Medical Association Limited

ABN 37 008 426 793

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604
 Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499
 Website : <http://www.ama.com.au/>



Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Doorstop, Fremantle, Tuesday, 4 May 2021

Subject: Australians in India, hospital supplies, COVID restrictions on birthing suites, aged care

OMAR KHORSHID: Today, I wrote to the Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt, on behalf of the AMA, asking them to immediately withdraw the threats to Australians who are stranded in India, to jail them, imprison them, or fine them heavily for simply wanting to return home and to escape the devastation that is occurring at the moment in India.

To be clear, the AMA is supportive of the pause on flights so that our hotel quarantine system can be readied for the increased risk that we are clearly seeing now of Australians returning with the virus, making absolutely sure that Australia is safe in the event that we have increased numbers coming through from India. But the announcement from the Government has caused a lot of distress in our community. There's been outrage from a very wide range of groups, including many doctors, AMA members, and in particular members of our Indian medical community who have been distressed beyond words with this announcement, on top of the distress that they're already experiencing with friends and family being exposed to the terrible risks that are occurring in India.

We believe that there is a clear way forward here. We need to fix the issues that the Government have now confirmed are occurring in hotel quarantine, to make hotel quarantine as safe as possible, to make it fit for purpose, so that we can bring Australians home from all over the world without the risk of the virus getting into the community.

In the longer term, there's also the need to replace hotel quarantine with purpose-built facilities. And I've had a conversation with the Minister for Health expressing that view today, and the AMA will continue to fight for that.

This afternoon, I'm meeting with the leadership of the Indian Medical Association to hear from them exactly what's going on in India and to work out what it is that Australians can do, what Australian doctors can do, and in particular what our Indian medical community can do, because people are wanting to help, but they feel helpless and they want to make a difference. And certainly, we'll be asking that question today when I meet with the Indian Medical Association.

QUESTION: Can you just spell out again why you're opposed to this policy criminalising the return of Australian citizens?

OMAR KHORSHID: Australians have a right to return home. That is absolutely clear and it's accepted by the Government. The main objection we have is that this is unnecessary. It is not a problem for us to take the odd person who manages to get back from India via Dubai or Doha or however they get back. And if they're able to do that, they should be welcomed home. And in fact, we should be reaching out. We should be repatriating Australians. The Government, in our view, should be doing everything in its power, chartering flights, using our Defence Force, if necessary, to bring the most vulnerable of the Australians in India home. And this this approach actually seems to be the exact opposite. This has been a real slap in the face for Indian Australians who are- Australians who are in India and also to their relatives, family and friends who are here in Australia.

QUESTION: Does the Prime Minister potentially have blood on his hands if Australians die in India?

OMAR KHORSHID: The Chief Medical Officer, Paul Kelly, has acknowledged that there is a risk of Australians stranded in India dying as a result of this decision by the Government, and that in the AMA's view is unacceptable. We need to be doing everything in our power, whilst also protecting

Australians here. We have come to be very complacent. We've come to enjoy the freedoms that are available almost nowhere else in the world. And that's only possible due to the very tough border restrictions that we've had in place. We're not suggesting to relax those, but we must bring Australian home when they're in need, no matter which country they're in.

QUESTION: The justification from the Federal Government is that a temporary pause will enable improvements to make hotel quarantine safe, but it doesn't seem that either State or Federal Governments are doing anything to make hotel quarantine safer. Are they both blaming each other?

OMAR KHORSHID: So, this morning, I've had a conversation with Health Minister Greg Hunt, making the point that we need to make hotel quarantine safer so that we can bring Australians home. Now that means our State and Territory Governments are working with the Federal Government on national standards that increase the safety of our hotel quarantine. We have some States that, in our view, are doing a pretty good job, and others like Western Australia, where there are things that could easily be done to improve safety. And we need National Cabinet to step up to the plate, make the decisions that need to be made, agree on a minimum set of standards, and allow us to bring Australians back from India.

QUESTION: So we had another security guard becoming positive here in WA in the hotel quarantine system. Is that good enough? Has the Government here mismanaged?

OMAR KHORSHID: The Government in Western Australia has not taken the opportunities it should have to make hotel quarantine as safe as possible. They should have learnt from the experiences in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, New Zealand, even South Australia, where the virus has gotten out of quarantine despite the measures that WA are using. And so it's no surprise at all to the AMA that we've had these breaches. And it's critical that the final steps are taken to make WA hotel quarantine as safe as the rest of the country.

QUESTION: Aside from the legalities, is this move- how would you describe it? Is it heartless? Is it callous?

OMAR KHORSHID: I actually think this move is not necessarily heartless or callous. I think it's an overreach. It's an overreaction by the Government. And to be honest, it's possibly an overreaction due to media pressure around loopholes with returning cricketers from India. You know, it's hard to know exactly how these decisions are made, but our point is it's unnecessary. It is a slap in the face for Australians who are over there who are asking for help, and instead they're feeling as though they're being pushed away. Now, we understand the Government are not pushing them away. They will be ending this pause at some point, hopefully on 15 May and moving to allow Australians to come back. But actually, we think we need much stronger action from the Government to bring Australians home, to look after them when they're overseas. And that applies in India, just as it does in every other country in the world.

QUESTION: Given the stalemate over hotel quarantine, here in WA at least, and who's responsible for fixing it, do you have any confidence that anything will have changed by 15 May?

OMAR KHORSHID: The AMA is very hopeful that the Government will use this pause constructively. I've said that to Greg Hunt today, that they must make the changes that are necessary during this pause. Otherwise, the pause has just harmed the health of Australians in India with no benefit in the future. They must use this time to make the final changes, particularly in States like Western Australia. But also, we really want to see our National Cabinet exploring what is the post-hotel quarantine future. These facilities were never designed for the purpose they're being used for. There will be an ongoing risk no matter what controls are put in place. And we're going to need quarantine for

many, many months, and probably years into the future looking at how this pandemic is rolling out around the world, and therefore we need facilities similar to the way that Howard Springs is set up around our major cities so that we can bring Australians home safely.

QUESTION: Who do you believe that responsibility should fall to, because at the moment it's getting handballed between the State and Federal Governments?

OMAR KHORSHID: It's very clear that the responsibility for quarantine rests with the Federal Government. And we are looking to the Federal Government for leadership around the future of quarantine in this country. Now, that may well involve the States actually doing it. That is something that the National Cabinet decided early in the pandemic, that the States would take on the role of quarantine because they run the health systems and because they're better at service delivery than the Federal Government is. But we need leadership. We need the Federal Government to put their hand in their pockets and to allow these facilities to be planned, developed, built so that they're ready for use as early as next year.

QUESTION: Is the policy for returning Australians, is that discriminatory?

OMAR KHORSHID: We are very concerned with the optics of this decision. It is a decision that was not taken when it could have been taken with respect to the United Kingdom, to the United States, where they had higher rates per capita of COVID-19 than India has at the moment. So, it's certainly not a good look for the Government, it's not a good look for Australia and our international reputation, and we should be concerned about that. We need to be seen as a country that looks after its people, that is compassionate, and the Government needs to make the right decisions to change the situation.

QUESTION: You said you've spoken to the Health Minister. What was his reaction to you calling for these laws to be ditched?

OMAR KHORSHID: The Minister was clear that the Government are not intending to enforce fines. They're hoping that nobody gets fined. And they made the point that by implementing a ban, that automatically means the fines are imposed. But our point is really that the ban is not necessary, that the flights themselves are restricted. That will achieve the outcome that they were looking for, which is a pause in arrivals. And if a few people slip through, then they slip through. We put them through quarantine like everybody else does. There's no problem there. The Minister also respects our views, understands that we have a different view to Government on this issue, and he's heard very loud and clear what our expectations are.

QUESTION: I just have some questions from our Melbourne bureau. What effect is COVID having on the supply of surgical operating apparatus?

OMAR KHORSHID: One of the many side effects of this pandemic has been a shortage of medical equipment, including drugs, other more advanced equipment, and even items as simple as the sterile wrapping that we use for operations in order to keep the instruments sterile once they've been through the sterilising machines. The effect of that, of the global shortage of polypropylene, which is being used for surgical masks and PPE for COVID, is that we may see restrictions in elective surgery in Australia if these shortages can't be resolved through the supply chains.

QUESTION: Do you think that restrictions on the number of people who can attend a birth in a hospital should be eased?

OMAR KHORSHID: Governments around Australia are protecting the health sector from COVID in a way that can seem rather draconian at times, but we also know that healthcare settings have been one

of the major zones of transmission of COVID around the world. And it is important that our healthcare facilities are adequately protected whilst there's virus out in the community.

QUESTION: What about protecting the mental health of new mums though? Doesn't that need to be weighed up?

OMAR KHORSHID: The best way we can protect the mental health of all Australians as a result of this pandemic is for us all to get vaccinated. That is our way out of this. That is our way for any Australian who's concerned about the pandemic to take some action themselves in order to address the situation for the future, to protect not just yourself, but actually others around you, and in particular vulnerable people, including pregnant women who can't be vaccinated whilst they're pregnant at this stage.

QUESTION: Do you mean they should continue the policy that the partner of the woman giving birth should only be allowed there into the room once the active labour starts and then asked to leave quite quickly afterwards?

OMAR KHORSHID: I'm not sure what specifically what you're talking about here. Which State?

QUESTION: WA.

OMAR KHORSHID: It is WA, yeah. So whilst we have an outbreak of COVID with around 100 possible exposure sites and the Government being uncertain as to where COVID is in the community, we do need to protect our hospitals, and that means, unfortunately, very significant restrictions on people accessing our hospitals during this period. But if we get this right, we can go back to relatively normal fairly soon and I think all West Australians are looking forward to that.

QUESTION: Just back on the surgical wraps, do you think it's a positive step if Australia starts to produce these kinds of equipment?

OMAR KHORSHID: Australia is part of a global economy, and unfortunately, the reality is that one of the base products, the polypropylene itself, which is in so many items that we use in everyday living, that is actually the problem. It's a global shortage. And although we can manufacture these materials here in Australia, it won't fix the problem that we have, a global shortage of the actual base chemicals that are required. Ultimately, this is something that will be solved on a global level. It's just important that Australia does everything it can to mitigate the impacts. And I know, from personal experience, that the hospitals are right now making the plans they need to, to make sure that any impact is minimised.

QUESTION: Just briefly on aged care, just your stance with the Federal Budget coming out with regard to nursing ratios in aged care and what should be legislated?

OMAR KHORSHID: The AMA is very keen for Government in this Budget to step up to the plate when it comes to aged care, to put their hand in their pocket and fund a transformation of the aged care sector, from a residential facility sector to a healthcare sector. It is critical that we get nurses back into nursing homes, and that means taking the Royal Commission's advice, mandating nurse to patient ratios, which is, in our view, one of the absolute critical steps at the core of the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

QUESTION: Is it disappointing that hasn't happened already, given what we're still seeing in aged care homes as recently [indistinct] in WA earlier this year?

OMAR KHORSHID: I think we have to acknowledge that the aged care crisis has been coming for a very long time and not enough has been done by successive governments and by our community in calling this out. The Royal Commission has made that very clear. But we now have an opportunity to make a difference, to change the way these facilities are run, but it's really expensive.

So I think we need to acknowledge that we need to give the Government time to work out how to fund the changes we need in aged care. We are talking many billions of dollars, and that may mean increases in taxes or Australians entering these facilities, putting their hand in their pocket to make a bigger contribution. And that, of course, is something that's very difficult for governments to do. But in our view, the Australian public have asked for a change in aged care. They'll be willing to put their hands in their pocket to fund adequate health care in aged care and to improve the human rights of our residents at aged care facilities.

QUESTION: Are the wrap shortages bringing delays to elective surgeries and how long are these delays are you expecting them to be?

OMAR KHORSHID: At this stage, our understanding of the shortage of surgical wraps is that it is a relative shortage, but we still have supplies for most facilities around the country. And the people that run those supply chains are doing their best to make sure there's no impact on elective surgery. It is possible that if the supplies look like they're running out, that State Governments will need to move to slightly restrict access to surgery.

Thanks very much.

4 May 2021

CONTACT: AMA Media 0427 209 753
media@ama.com.au

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