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**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Press conference Friday 25 June 2021

**Subject:** NSW restrictions, quarantine and COVID issues.

**OMAR KHORSHID:** The AMA is really concerned about the situation in Sydney at the moment with the current Delta outbreak. And whilst we are pleased that the New South Wales Government have gone further than before and announced a lockdown in four local government areas. Unfortunately, in our view, that's just not quite enough. What we really need are clear rules for all Sydneysiders, that say: stay at home, so that we can get ahead of this virus and stop further transmission. The Delta virus is different. It is being transmitted far more easily and everyone has acknowledged that it is different. Sydney has not faced this before and that means a different approach is required. Our concern with the current announcement is that it is confusing for many people in Sydney. If you work in the CBD but live outside of it; we know if you contract that disease, you're going to give it to your family. That's happening with this Delta virus in Sydney right now. But the rules don't apply as far as we can see, to family. And there's also some confusion about who's in and who's out.

An alternative and what the AMA believes would be the right move, is a lockdown of the Sydney Basin, the whole of Sydney doing the same thing, rules applying equally to everybody. And if we can do that, then hopefully the government can get ahead of the virus, give the contact tracers a chance to catch up and try and avoid months and months of restrictions in Sydney. The economic consequences of lock down are significant, but the economic consequences of getting this wrong are catastrophic, not just for Sydney, but for all of Australia. And our belief is that we need everyone in Sydney to now do the right thing and stay at home in order to stop this virus taking a hold in Australia.

**QUESTION:** Dr Khorshid, Sydney's been reporting cases in the double digits for a couple of days now. Do you think they should have taken a harder stance earlier against this virus, this outbreak?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Each state has taken a different approach to the coronavirus and all of our other states and territories would have locked down much earlier than what's happened in Sydney. And Sydney has been proud of its response. Sydneysiders have been very supportive of the New South Wales Government approach. But the reality is the Delta strain is different and we should have gone faster. You only need to look at the Melbourne outbreak. What happened in Melbourne was the government tried, last year, to get ahead slowly, to geographically control the virus and they weren't able to keep ahead of it. And it resulted in 900 deaths and an extraordinary amount of hardship for people in Melbourne. That must not be allowed to happen in Sydney.

**QUESTION:** The fact that so many vulnerable people have been vaccinated now and that no one has died from COVID this year. Has the risk profile changed at all?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** The risk profile for deaths in nursing homes has hopefully changed, but the reality is that Australia has been relying on an elimination strategy. So borders will not open between Sydney and other states, unless Sydney eliminates the virus again. We are not, at this stage, living with COVID. We will have to get to the point one day where we do live with it, but that point is not now, because not enough Australians have been vaccinated. Only 65 per cent of Australians over the age of 70 have had a single dose of the vaccine, let alone the two doses that you need to be properly protected against this virus.

**QUESTION:** In December, when Sydney did certain lockdowns in some areas, in Northern Beaches, that was a strain then that medical experts were concerned about. Obviously, this is another strain medical experts are concerned with. Their contact tracing system in New South Wales, is that so-called

gold standard. So are you saying that you're still not confident that it's good enough with this particular strain?

OMAR KHORSHID: The Delta strain is significantly more transmissible than anything Sydney has faced before. They did manage to get ahead of the outbreak early in the year, but it still took around about a month and it impacted the lives of people on the Northern Beaches significantly. Delta is now out and about. There are locations throughout Sydney that are of concern and there are hundreds and thousands of people being traced right now. And of course, the government don't know who's got the virus that hasn't tested positive yet. So we've got to get ahead of it. The virus is probably two or three days ahead of the contact tracing. We've seen that before, but we haven't, in Sydney, faced Delta before.

QUESTION: On hotel quarantine, the Prime Minister's made specific suggestions about where purpose-built facilities should be in Queensland and Western Australia. What do you make of those suggestions? And should we not also be looking at, say, Adelaide or Canberra that have international airports and world-class hospitals?

OMAR KHORSHID: It's good to see the Prime Minister making concrete steps towards opening up quarantine facilities that are fit for purpose, that are safe and that are appropriately located close to airports and close to hospitals. So we really welcome these announcements of the last couple of days for potentially Western Australia and Queensland, and of course, the- a more solid announcement in Victoria. And we hope that both the Queensland and WA Governments will work with the Federal Government to set up these facilities, to make the decisions, make the investment so that we've got some safe facilities as early as possible next year.

QUESTION: What about other states and territories, though? Would you like to see South Australia and ACT?

OMAR KHORSHID: We'd like to see facilities in each state and territory, in particular, where there are international arrivals. We don't know how long we're going to be battling COVID-19, but it's going to be for years. And of course, we don't know when the next pandemic is coming. So this will be an investment in Australia's future, in Australia's health, but it doesn't need to be wasted. These facilities can be used for social housing, for a detention centre, for some other purpose. So we don't think it's wasted money and they should be set up everywhere where arrivals are coming from overseas.

QUESTION: But as you say, those facilities won't be ready until potentially next year. What will life be like until those become operational?

OMAR KHORSHID: We only need to look at the last few months to see what life is going to be like in Australia until we have a near complete vaccination program. We are seeing hotel quarantine, transport, airports. We're seeing breaches every few weeks, right across the country. We can't point the finger at one state government or one part of the sector. This virus is highly transmissible and it's getting ahead of us again and again.

QUESTION: And further to that, does this show that quarantine is going to be with us for years? The fact that, you know, the government's looking at quarantine facilities that won't be set up till next year?

OMAR KHORSHID: We expect there will be some need for quarantine. But what that looks like is still uncertain. We do have this virus changing, and even vaccination may not prevent the need for some form of quarantine in the medium term or even in the long term, depending on what happens with the virus.

QUESTION: From a Queensland perspective, the Queensland Government had the Toowoomba Wellcamp quarantine proposal on the table. From a health perspective of course, do you think locating

the quarantine facility close to the airport in Brisbane is much better for health outcomes than putting it in Toowoomba?

OMAR KHORSHID: It's important that quarantine facilities are near health facilities because people get really sick with COVID. And we owe a duty of care to anybody coming in, whether they be Australian or overseas visitors. You can't put them in a quarantine facility that is not within the reach of appropriate health facilities. So we do support facilities being located on Commonwealth land, with a contribution from both state and federal governments, close to airports. and of course, close to big hospitals.

QUESTION: We see quite a bit of politicking, I guess, between the Queensland State Government and the Federal Government. How important is it for these two to work together right now, to get this done?

OMAR KHORSHID: The reason Australia has managed COVID so well is because we've seen cooperation in ways never before between federal and state government. And we need both levels of government to continue to learn, to learn that lesson, to work together. Fights over vaccination rollouts or quarantine facilities are not helpful. We are all in it together. And I think all Australians expect our state and federal governments to cooperate in the interests of all of our health.

QUESTION: Speaking about cooperation, we're a year and a half into this pandemic now. You said vaccinations won't necessarily end the need for quarantine and some lockdowns, but we're still seeing states react differently to these sorts of outbreaks. Would you like to see more unified approach and a national system for deciding when to lock down to particular areas?

OMAR KHORSHID: The AMA's been calling for a uniform national approach to both quarantine and, of course, border arrangements and our responses to outbreaks for many, many months. But the reality is it hasn't happened. It's probably not going to happen. And the states retain the complete control over how they run their own state. So rather than continuing to beat that drum, I think we have to work with the reality of the situation and just encourage each state to do the right thing. And that's why we're speaking today, because the AMA believes that New South Wales needs to do a little bit more. We know that they have been very proud of their record, and it has been called the gold standard. But we don't want them to learn the hard way that this virus is very tricky, it is getting ahead of us. And that means that being flexible, learning from past mistakes and learning from the disasters in other countries is absolutely critical.

QUESTION: Do you think we will not ever come to an agreement on lockdowns and that sort of thing? Do you think it will always be different WA, your home state, to New South Wales for instance?

OMAR KHORSHID: I expect our federation to act like it always has, where each state does what it thinks is right for that state. That's our Constitution, that's the way Australia is set up. No different to other federations like the US. I think that's just, that's the reality of our country.

QUESTION: Do you think we'd still be seeing lockdowns in Sydney today if the government had moved sooner on federal quarantine and faster on vaccines?

OMAR KHORSHID: I don't think an earlier approach to federal quarantine facilities would have prevented the situation right now in Sydney. If we had managed to procure enough vaccine for our whole country and have that job finished by the middle of the year, then yes, we would not be needing lockdowns now in Sydney, I think that is fairly clear. But the reality is we haven't had the vaccines available, and Australia has been doing everything it possibly can to access enough vaccine. We've got over 200 million doses ordered now, we just need to be a little bit patient for the rest of this year and

keep up the fight. We know how to battle this virus, we've done it successfully again and again in each state and territory. All slightly different, but all successful. And we need to make sure we stay the course until the vaccination program is complete.

QUESTION: Just back on quarantine, sorry. I know there's a lot of uncertainty, but in terms of how long quarantine will be around for - I know it's based on a number of factors - definitely next year; do you think even into 2023?

OMAR KHORSHID: We expect quarantine to be definitely a reality for all of our lives into next year. But what the international opening-up looks like is anyone's guess at the moment. I'd be gazing into a crystal ball to tell you what is going to be happening in 2023. But I think we need to get used to the fact that this virus will be present with us everywhere in the world for many years to come. And our border arrangements will probably need to permanently change, recognising this ongoing threat. But there's many uncertainties, including the potential effects of new vaccines that may cover new variants very successfully in the future.

QUESTION: Do we have the medical workforce available to staff multiple large quarantine facilities?

OMAR KHORSHID: We do have enough workforce to staff quarantine facilities, because we're doing it already with hotel quarantine. So I don't think that's a major problem. But Australia does have a significant issue with the health workforce, especially with low unemployment now and less people coming into the country. And we are seeing right throughout our country, in hospitals and general practices, rural and urban, that the health workforce is a significant problem. And as we go to open up, that's one of the things that must be resolved, because without our hospital system and our general practice system, our vaccination system, our respiratory clinics being ready when we open the borders and bring back in the flu and bring COVID into Australia, our health system won't be ready. So we have a big challenge, and I hope that that is the focus of both state and federal governments over the next six months.

Thank you very much, everyone.

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