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**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Doorstop, Perth, Friday, 30 July 2021

**Subject:** Dr Omar Khorshid, President of the Australian medical association, speaking on the lockdowns in Sydney.

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OMAR KHORSHID: The AMA is speaking out yet again on a Friday afternoon about the catastrophic situation we're seeing in Sydney. And we're making a call, a call to the New South Wales government and a call to the people of Sydney. To start with the government. Now is not the time for compromise, for balanced lockdowns, for thinking about the economy, freedoms versus the health advice. Now is the time to act strongly to eliminate the virus from the Sydney community. This is probably our last chance. As numbers keep going up, it gets harder and harder for contact tracers to get ahead, even with the military assistance. The situation could become impossible and Sydney could be living with COVID for the foreseeable future. That means lockdowns for the foreseeable future. It means disruption to everyone's lives, and it means illness, misery and death for people who are not vaccinated.

So we're at a turning point yet again. The lockdowns have not worked the way we all wanted them to. Now, part of that is because it's been a little too little and a little too late each time. There is an opportunity, though, for some tweaks to the lockdown measures to make them more effective. We've seen the virus being eliminated from other places, including Melbourne, they had such a larger outbreak and thousands and thousands of cases. Yes, it was a less transmissible virus, but they didn't have the benefit of vaccines, and they still managed to get ahead of it. We now have vaccines. We now know so much about the virus and we know that it does not spread by magic. It spreads from person to person. Lockdowns work if they're implemented properly.

So what the AMA is calling for is less confusion, less complexity around the rules for lockdowns. Sydney needs to be in this as one. So we're talking about the five kilometre rule applying to all of Sydney. Masks outside applying to all of Sydney. Rules around essential workers applying to all of Sydney. Because the virus is not just in western Sydney, it's not just in south-west Sydney. We are seeing cases right now across the city. And, of course, there are virus fragments being detected in sewage plants across the city, and that means the virus is yet again, as it has always been, it's just a little ahead of the authorities and it's time for a final effort to get ahead of the virus before giving up and having, being forced to live with COVID.

The message to the people of Sydney is similar. You have an opportunity to be part of the solution or to be part of the problem. If you want the lockdown to end, you must abide by the rules and you must go and get vaccinated. There is no reason for any adult in Sydney not to go and get a vaccine today, tomorrow or next week. There is absolutely no reason. We have millions of doses of vaccines available in the country. There's enough for everyone to get their first dose fairly quickly, which will give you straight away protection against ending up in hospital, like the almost 200 Sydneysiders in hospital right now, or ending up in ICU. And of course, the even bigger benefit is you'll be contributing to the end of the lockdown. If you're not vaccinated, you are part of the problem and it's time to do something about that. Not to protest in the streets, not to add to the problem, but to be part of the solution.

I'd also like to say something about the proposal for Year 12 to go back in a couple of weeks time, partially vaccinated and taking vaccines away from regional New South Wales. Now, I understand the concern about Year 12, the importance of HSC, but at the end of the day, Sydney is in an unprecedented crisis. And not only is the future of Sydney at risk, but the future of the country is at risk if Sydney doesn't get this right. Year 12 can be managed in different ways. Last year, we managed. This year, we will manage. All of Sydney is in this together. There is no need for the additional risk of bringing Year 12 back to school, bringing teachers back to school, putting those teachers at risk, putting the families of those teachers, the other staff, the cleaners, the people in the canteens, and of course, the families of Year 12 students themselves. Putting all those people at risk just for this purpose seems nonsensical to the AMA. And we call on the New South Wales government to revisit that decision, especially if cases continue to rise over the next couple of weeks, which is likely, unfortunately, to be the reality.

QUESTION: Doctor, do you think the New South Wales government has already lost the people in being, I guess, slow with the rollout of the restrictions? We saw the massive protests last week, and even yesterday when the mask mandate came in, there were people talking to journalists saying: oh, why should we have to wear masks. Whereas I think here in Western Australian people understand when we have a lockdown, it's just what you've got to do. Do you think they've already missed the boat and it's hard to recoup those measures now?

OMAR KHORSHID: I hope the New South Wales government would accept that their approach at the start of this outbreak has contributed to where we are now. By being too slow, by bringing in a lockdown that was not effective, the length of the lockdown has been extended, and of course this message that we- earlier in the pandemic that we don't do this, we don't need to go into lockdown, is now coming back to bite the New South Wales Government. And it's contributing to the very difficult situation in Sydney right now. But as I said before, everyone in Sydney has a choice now. You can be part of the solution. You can help everyone get out of this by doing the right thing. By staying at home. Every time you leave the house, not only are you putting yourself at risk of attracting the virus, but you could already have it. There are hundreds of people, right now, in Sydney, who have COVID-19, they don't know they've got it. But when you walk outside your house, whether it's to the supermarket, to your job, whether it's to go for a jog, you are transmitting that virus to other people that you come in contact with. So you need to stay at home, and you need to go and get yourself vaccinated.

QUESTION: We heard some shocking details this morning about people not bringing their sick relatives to hospital until they're extremely unwell, even dead, sadly. Do you think more needs to be done to ensure people feel safe going to hospitals in New South Wales?

OMAR KHORSHID: The advantage we have now with the hospital system in Sydney compared to what happened in Victoria last year, is that hospital workers have high levels of vaccination. So we don't expect, when you go to hospital, that you're going to contract COVID. Or that you're going to be putting yourself or your relatives at risk. Hospitals are safe places, and if you're sick, if you're sick enough to be in hospital, go to hospital. They will look after you, and they've got the mechanisms in place to prevent the spread of COVID within those hospitals.

QUESTION: Just on the back of - I know it's raining, I'll do this quickly. But, you know, the protest we've seen, there's obviously a large proportion of Sydneysiders that are fed up and they don't believe in COVID. Or they've convinced themselves that the death rate is lower with the Delta strain. What would you say to them?

OMAR KHORSHID: The message to people who don't believe COVID's a real threat, is simply: look at the cases in hospital. We have young people, healthy people in hospital who've done nothing wrong. They haven't been heavy smokers, they haven't made lifestyle decisions, all they've done is been exposed to COVID, and they've been unlucky enough to be one of those people who gets severe disease. This virus can affect anyone. It can affect children; it can affect young healthy people. And of course, we know it has a devastating effect on the elderly. And the only way to protect yourself, your community and your family, is to get a vaccine. The vaccines are out there, the AZ vaccine is available in huge quantities. It is a safe and effective vaccine. And there is a no mixed messaging here. AZ is for everyone, AZ is available now, go and get one.

QUESTION: National Cabinet's meeting today, again Doctor, to talk about that magical number that we need to see from vaccinated population. What I'm sure you've been asked before, but what is the figure that the AMA wants in terms of ending these lockdowns, and in the long run, getting international travel back online?

OMAR KHORSHID: There's a lot of complexity about the modelling that the Government's receiving, and I'm sure they'll be considering these numbers for days and weeks to come, with no clear answer coming today. And the AMA doesn't have any magic number either. But I can say, I know what the aim is. And the aim is for everyone to be vaccinated. That is the only way we can protect each other from this terrible disease, and we know that there are more challenges coming in the future. We didn't expect Delta, we've been caught out by Delta. Sydney, like India, like Indonesia, have been caught out by Delta. And there's probably another one coming. So, our solution is vaccination. And those countries that have achieved significant levels of vaccination, even below the 80 per cent, have seen a huge impact on the effect even with thousands, and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of cases, people are not ending up in hospital anywhere near as much. Far fewer people are dying. So vaccination is a solution, and we need to be aiming for 100 per cent, but that doesn't mean we have to wait until then for lockdowns to cease.

QUESTION: I know you mentioned it earlier, but what do you think about the planned protests for this weekend?

OMAR KHORSHID: The message from the AMA for anyone considering joining the protests on the weekend in Sydney is, don't do it. If you are there, you are part of the problem. You are going to put Sydney's future further at risk. You're going to extend the lockdown that you're so against. And you're going to negatively impact the lives of fellow residents of Sydney. If you want to be part of the solution, go get your vaccine, stay at home, and then we will get out of this lockdown quicker than if you turn up on the streets and protest.

30 July 2021

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