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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Doorstop, Thursday, 8 July 2021

Subject: COVID-19 situation in NSW

OMAR KHORSHID: Today, the AMA wrote to Premier Gladys Berejiklian, encouraging her to stay the course and ensure that the settings in New South Wales are not relaxed too early, despite increasing pressure from business groups and others. It is absolutely critical that New South Wales sticks to its guns and eliminates the virus from the community if we're to have any hope of getting back to normal. And let me be very clear here, elimination has been Australia's secret to success with COVID. We have driven the virus out of our communities and we have reaped the benefits of that, both socially and economically. And that lesson must continue to be learnt. And New South Wales has to eliminate the virus from the community before opening up again. Otherwise, we're going to see disaster. And just to explain what that would look like, we would be talking about long term significant restrictions on people's movements, on going in and out of lockdown as hospitals fill up with extremely sick people and a devastating economic impact, not just on New South Wales, but, in fact, on the rest of the country. We would see permanently closed borders between most other states and New South Wales, which would also, of course, have devastating impact on many, many families and businesses.

The reality is the only solution for now is continue lockdowns until the virus is eliminated. And unfortunately, that has not yet been achieved. Why hasn't it been achieved? Probably because we still have people out and about moving within communities and transmitting the virus. And so the AMA have very much backed the Premier's call from today for everyone in New South Wales to do the right thing. If you don't, and if the virus continues to spread through the community, the lockdown must be extended, and that's something that we know everybody wants to avoid. Now, the AMA understands that lockdowns have a devastating impact on people's lives, and on businesses, and on the economy generally, but just remember the alternative is prolonged lockdowns, prolonged restrictions, and much worse economic hardship. So it's probably just a short period more of pain for New South Wales, assuming people do the right thing. But remembering that if people don't do the right thing, then, of course, the lockdown will be extended longer than it needs to be.

QUESTION: How realistic is eliminating the virus going to be? I mean, it looks like New South Wales is almost conceding that's going to be really difficult to do.

OMAR KHORSHID: There's no alternative to elimination for New South Wales. And nowhere in the world has any community been able to live with Delta without very significant levels of vaccination. We are simply not ready to live with this Delta strain. And we're already seeing significant numbers of people, around 10 per cent of the cases are already in hospital. Now just multiply that out to thousands and thousands of cases, which is the inevitable outcome within a very short period of time if restrictions are eased. And just imagine what the hospital system will look like, and imagine what you might experience if you need to go to hospital for urgent care, such as with a heart attack or with cancer. This is avoidable through continued lockdowns, and that is the reality of the situation for New South Wales.

QUESTION: How serious is the impact? How serious could the impact be on other states with what's going on in New South Wales?

OMAR KHORSHID: So the situation in New South Wales will, of course, flow to other states, because at the end of the day, our borders are porous and people move around. Even in the setting of

border closures, there will be an ongoing risk to other states. And of course, closed borders affect people on both sides of those borders. So many, many people have legitimate reasons for needing to go to New South Wales, but if New South Wales does things differently, then, of course, those borders will be shut and many, many businesses, families, and others will be negatively affected until we're fully vaccinated, which, of course, is looking like the end of the year.

QUESTION: Has this just got away from the New South Wales Government? I mean, Dr Kerry Chant this morning said that they don't like lockdowns and they do the bare minimum. Have they moved too slow? Has this just gotten away from them and we are now in a world of pain?

OMAR KHORSHID: When you look back in retrospect, would New South Wales be in a better position if they locked down earlier? I think the answer to that is unequivocally, yes. But of course, this is Australia's first experience with a significant outbreak of Delta. And like throughout the rest of the pandemic, lessons had to be learnt. Unfortunately, that has resulted in the need for a longer lockdown. But we do know that lockdowns work. We've seen in Victoria that with far more cases, lockdowns eventually did work. It was a lot of pain for many Victorians, but they did eliminate the virus. They got back to relatively normal. And that has got to be the aim for New South Wales.

QUESTION: Is there anything more they can do right now?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, there is a question about whether there should be more restrictions put in place during the lockdown. I think it would be acknowledged that there have been more cases in the community than they were expecting at this stage, almost two weeks into the lockdown. And there may need to be tighter restrictions on community movement in order to squash that down. And the AMA would certainly support that if it means limiting the duration of the lockdown, because, of course, if we don't get on top of it, the lockdown will have to be extended.

QUESTION: Thirty-eight new cases, though, today. I mean, it's not a good number. This could just go on for months. As you say, you know, full vaccination by the end of the year. Does that mean, I mean, do you support the Premier's stance that we essentially have this permanent hard border now with New South Wales?

OMAR KHORSHID: I really hope that New South Wales is able to eradicate the virus and get back to relatively normal, relatively quickly. But it will involve the Government putting in very difficult measures, if that's what they need to do, in order to eliminate the virus. We can't live with this virus. And New South Wales certainly can't live in lockdown until we're fully vaccinated. So if that means turning up the restrictions, then that's exactly what they should do.

QUESTION: What about our response to that? Does that mean that our hard border should remain in place with New South Wales until the end of the year, if need be?

OMAR KHORSHID: Western Australia will do what is necessary to protect Western Australians. We've seen that from the McGowan Government so far. And I'm very confident that a hard border with New South Wales will be the reality until New South Wales has eliminated the virus from the community.

QUESTION: What do you make of the situation? As you said, we haven't seen anything like this here before, yet. How serious is it?

OMAR KHORSHID: The Delta outbreak is probably the biggest threat to Australia's prosperity that we've seen during the COVID crisis. The numbers aren't anywhere near what they were in Victoria, but the virus is so much more transmissible. And so we are at a crossroads here. If the state of New South Wales does the right thing, then all indications are the virus will be eliminated and we can get back to relatively normal. And of course, that really important task of vaccinating the whole

community. Get it wrong, and we are looking at a very different Australia until that point is reached of full vaccination.

QUESTION: Is there a counter strategy to this, though? I mean, do we learn to live with the virus, as so many people are coming out and saying? You know, do we just- otherwise, we just risk staying closed off forever?

OMAR KHORSHID: There's no such thing as living with the Delta. That is really clear. You only need to look at other countries around the world to see what Delta does to a population that is not vaccinated. We are not in the situation of the US or the UK where we have very significant numbers of people vaccinated. We're simply not there yet. So we need to look at India or Indonesia to see what the reality will be in Australia if we let this virus rip through the community. We do have the benefit of significant numbers of people in aged care facilities now being vaccinated. That means we would see less deaths in that group than we saw in the Victoria outbreak. But of course, this virus, this Delta strain affects young people. It affects people in their middle ages and we are seeing young people in hospital and in ICU right now in New South Wales as a result of Delta.

QUESTION: Do you think enough is being done to get the message across to multilingual communities? We're seeing south western Sydney now having lots and lots of exposure sites. Is enough being done? And what can doctors do about that?

OMAR KHORSHID: Doctors are very connected to their communities, particularly general practitioners. And it's absolutely critical that the health messages, the public health orders are communicated to everyone in the community, because we need everyone in the community to do the right thing to have any chance of eliminating the virus. I saw from the Premier's comments that there have been detailed conversations with community leaders and religious leaders in the various communities in Sydney, that's a good thing. And I would encourage them to do more of that. But also to use the connections, as I said, that GPs have with their communities to make sure that everyone is aware of the critical nature of this, and that spreading the virus, even within a home, can actually lead to that virus getting out further into the community, affecting more people. The situation in New South Wales is such that people should not be out and about to do their shopping unless they absolutely need to. They should not be going anywhere unless they absolutely need to, because that is the only way to protect vulnerable communities and to protect our Australian economy from the ravages of COVID.

QUESTION: It is up to the community and the people to do the right thing. And if these are the people that aren't following the rules, it can have dire consequences for the whole country. Is that right?

OMAR KHORSHID: Yes, everyone needs to do the right thing. And it only takes a small number of people doing the wrong thing for the impacts of this lockdown to be extended again and again, and also for the lives of vulnerable people and even healthy people to be put at risk if they're not yet vaccinated.

QUESTION: Not just in New South Wales. We're seeing this happen here and could quickly turn?

OMAR KHORSHID: We've already seen how fast this virus can jump borders. And although there are border restrictions now, it is likely that if we have a huge outbreak in New South Wales because restrictions were relaxed too early, that the impacts would be felt as the virus escapes across those borders and into the rest of the Australian community.

QUESTION: Is WA vaccinating fast enough? At last check I think a few days ago, we were last.

OMAR KHORSHID: WA is certainly not leading the pack when it comes to vaccination numbers, but we are in a constrained situation. And of course, WA has had less of a personal experience with

COVID than many other states. We've seen vaccination numbers shoot up in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria as they've been aware of the risk of COVID and that COVID is in the community. And I guess the message for West Australians is, don't be complacent. Let's learn from what's happening around the rest of the country. And remember that vaccination is our only way out of this.

QUESTION: Part of the problem is you can't get an appointment for a vaccination. For Pfizer, for example, there's nothing available until at least October. So this message of you've got to get vaccinated, is very frustrating. Do you understand or can see that as well?

OMAR KHORSHID: It is really frustrating for Australians who want to be vaccinated and can't access a vaccine. But this is a situation we've known of for many months. So it's been the reality of the decision to move away from AstraZeneca for a large number of the population, and we simply have to work with the vaccines that we've got. The good news though is that the numbers will be increasing well before October. More GPs will be getting involved and appointments will be available with GPs in the coming months for people to get vaccinated. And we simply need to stick together to remember that until we are all vaccinated, these public health measures - the lockdowns, the restrictions - are our only tool. And then once we are vaccinated, we can then continue that conversation about opening back up and returning to some semblance of normal.

QUESTION: Just on the border, the ACT, you know you have to do 14 days' quarantine, they haven't had a local case for 300 days. Is that fair?

OMAR KHORSHID: The situation with borders between WA, South Australia and the ACT is baffling, I think, for many, because there have been no cases of COVID in ACT. However, ACT has an extremely porous border with New South Wales, and many people who work in the ACT actually live in New South Wales. So whilst ACT has been doing extremely well, I understand why Mark McGowan and other premiers may be concerned about the ACT, and the simplest way to open up our border to Canberra is to fix the situation in New South Wales.

QUESTION: Can I also ask on the ship situation and the breach that we had in Geraldton? What's your take on that? I mean, it's the second case where we've had a lift exposure, and also ask about more than 50 people in the ED with that crewman in there for three hours.

OMAR KHORSHID: Hotel quarantine is not our only weakness when it comes to preventing COVID coming in from overseas into Australia. And it's well understood that shipping is another major risk factor. Unfortunately, any system that involves people is subject to failing and we have to be prepared for breaches to continue. I think everyone is aware of their responsibilities. Those people who are running emergency departments and hospitals are aware of their obligations. But sometimes, when we become a little complacent and when we don't see much COVID in the community, lessons get forgotten. So I think those incidents that we've seen are a wake-up call to everyone that we are not going to be completely free of COVID ever. For the moment, we need to remain extremely vigilant at all those points of risk. We need to remember that a certain level of social distancing is helpful in the community even when there's no COVID because we never know when that next breach is coming. And if we work together for the next few months, we will be able to get our community vaccinated and move out of this very distressing and disruptive situation that we've been in for such a long time now.

QUESTION: Do you not see a sort of alternate way forward where WA can drop its hard border but people could come in and we still do the right thing, we still observe restrictions here and there. We trust our contact tracing system. Is that not viable rather than just shutting WA off from the rest of the country until possibly the end of the year?

OMAR KHORSHID: Relying on contact tracing and people doing the right thing in order to prevent exposure to COVID has been shown by the situation in New South Wales not to work. So it is not an option for WA to let people in that could have COVID and then try and chase them down and suppress the virus. I'll say again, suppression has not been our strategy in Australia. We have been using elimination, and it has worked and better than anywhere else in the world. So we just need to remember those messages. There is a question about whether people who are vaccinated could move across borders, and I think that is definitely worth consideration by the WA Government and other premiers, because the risk of someone who is fully vaccinated actually bringing COVID across the border is extremely low, and it's a way to keep some travel going whilst we're in this difficult situation.

QUESTION: Great, thank you.

OMAR KHORSHID: Thank you.

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