

**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Outlet: Channel 9 *Today*, Monday, 20 December 2021

**Subject:** Omicron outbreak, urging need for reintroduced restrictions

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**HOST:** David Campbell and Sylvia Jeffreys

**DAVID CAMPBELL:** Welcome back. Thousands of Australians are facing Christmas in isolation as Omicron continues to spread an alarming rate. Now, in the past five days, more than 10,000 people have tested positive for COVID in New South Wales, while in Victoria, infection rates remain stubbornly high.

**SYLVIA JEFFREYS:** It is a concern. For more, we're joined by President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Omar Khorshid, in Perth. Thank you for your time this morning, Doctor. Now, authorities are holding the line in response to the Omicron threat, refusing to reintroduce restrictions. You strongly disagree?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Morning, David and Sophie. Yes, I do disagree, and that is because I'm watching what's happening around the world where Omicron is devastating communities that have just as high a level of either vaccination or immunity from having previously caught the virus as we have here in Australia, but still getting skyrocketing cases and bringing in lockdowns, bringing in severe restrictions on people's freedoms, simply to keep some kind of a lid on this very rapidly spreading virus. There's nothing different about Australia, and that is our future if we don't do something now.

**DAVID CAMPBELL:** Well, the New South Wales Premier wants people to take their own personal responsibility, which is all very well and good if you're relying on people's better angels. But what we're seeing is that people go out, they test positive, and then they go out again. That's just reckless, and I don't know what we can do about that.

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Well, we have to recognise that while some people will do the right thing most of the time, very few of us do the right thing all the time. And, of course, some simply won't do the right thing. And that's why unambiguous measures- if masks are necessary, then they should probably be mandated, rather than just saying, oh, it's a good idea if you feel like it on the day. Mandates have worked. They're uncomfortable, but they've worked throughout the world in keeping a bit of a lid. We're not going to get free of Omicron, but we want to keep the lid on it, flatten that curve a little, and give Australians time to go out and get their booster shots, and allow our healthcare sector a little bit of breathing space over Christmas, before we face the very challenging months ahead.

**SYLVIA JEFFREYS:** That's the thing, because the healthcare workers are exhausted already. We're seeing Omicron cases rise in Victoria and Queensland as well. Should people be rethinking their Christmas plans, scaling them back?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Well, certainly, if you're planning mass indoor events, I would certainly urge anyone to rethink those events if there's any chance Omicron could be coming along to

your party. We know that outdoor is much, much safer than indoors. And of course, if you can keep those numbers a bit smaller than you reduce the chance of a super-spreader event. The other key thing you can do to improve the chances of your Christmas being less disrupted is, of course, not to catch COVID in the days before Christmas. That means wearing your mask all the time and limiting your time in those mass indoor places like the supermarkets, unfortunately, where we're all going to be in the next few days.

DAVID CAMPBELL: What about the booster shots now? There's a real push from a lot of politicians on the local and federal level to get ATAGI to reduce it from five months to three months. What are your thoughts on that?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, it would be nice to support that, but the reality is we can't deliver those doses into arms any faster than is currently being done. So it's actually going to be fairly meaningless to move that to three months, because it will simply mean that people won't be able to access the booster, even though they are eligible. So unfortunately, we do need some of those restrictions, like mask-wearing, to be in place just to slow the spread of the virus a little. It's not going to slow it a lot, to be completely honest. It's a very, very fast spreading virus. But if we can buy ourselves a little time, we can get those boosters into arms and give people the maximum protection. And the good news is there appears to be, and it's early data, but there appears to be over 80 per cent protection from severe disease with Omicron if you've had your booster dose.

SYLVIA JEFFREYS: Do you think rapid antigen tests should be free?

OMAR KHORSHID: The problem with free tests is that they get wasted, and at the end of the day, someone has to pay for any test that comes into the country. So I'm not sure they should be free, but certainly we need to be doing everything we can to give people access to tests. One of the ways to protect yourself this Christmas, and to stop anybody going along to Christmas and giving Omicron to Grandma, is to make sure you haven't got it when you turn up. So having a rapid antigen test, if you're living in Newcastle, for instance, is not a bad way to try and reduce the chance of spreading it this Christmas. But, of course, you can only have that test if you can find it at the pharmacy or at a supermarket.

DAVID CAMPBELL: Yeah, and you're right. They are selling out. They are now the toilet paper of 2021. Dr Omar Khorshid, we really do appreciate your time this morning. Thank you so much.

OMAR KHORSHID: You're welcome guys.

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