

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, Outlet: ABC Radio Perth, Friday, 21 January 2022

Subject: A middle path for opening up in WA, and need for a 'vaccine +' strategy

HOST: Nadia Mitsopoulos

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: I want to get some reaction from the health sector. First, let's go to Dr Omar Khorshid. He's the President of the Australian Medical Association, who this morning tweeted that he was gutted by this decision. Doctor, good morning, and why are you gutted?

OMAR KHORSHID: Morning, Nadia. It's a great sense of disappointment, I think, that Western Australians are not going to be connected to the rest of the world, the rest of our own country. And as I think you've been hearing this morning, this impacts everybody in a different way. And I think that the really hard thing was also that there was no date. It's not just a four-week delay because we need more rapid antigen tests or we need to get our hospital system ready. This is an indefinite move, and relying on some kind of magical vaccination number in the future, having almost reached the last target that was set. So I think that it's like the rug's been pulled out from under many peoples' feet.

On the flipside many healthcare workers are relieved because they're terrified of what they've seen in New South Wales. And I think the message for me is that we must not follow New South Wales. That is not what we want. We are going to get Omicron - in fact, we've already got it - and we need to find that middle-road of opening ourselves up, but also controlling the spread of the virus, making sure that we protect our health system as best we can. And I think South Australia shows us that there is a middle path. It's not New South Wales or shutting borders, and that middle path is probably the best way for us to go. And, in fact, it's going to happen at some point, no matter what Mr McGowan does with the borders.

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: What's the middle path, though? Because the Premier says this is all about protecting the state, keeping people safe, on a day that we find out that New South Wales has another 46 deaths. Yesterday, another 20 in Victoria. Tasmania has recorded its first death from Omicron. I mean, we are looking at that and people here are saying, I don't want that in WA.

OMAR KHORSHID: It's here, Nadia, and it will come regardless of what we do, and I think people need to understand this. There's no way unless we stop receiving any goods, there's no trucks crossing the borders. Omicron will get into Western Australia. It has done, and it may well be spreading right now through our shopping centres and other places where people are mixing. So at best, a closed border buys some more time...

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: [Talks over] Which our hospital system needs - is that a fair enough statement?

OMAR KHORSHID: The hospital system is not ready, but is it going to be ready in a month? We've had a couple of years, so I don't think that's what we need. Mr McGowan said we need

the third booster dose, the third dose, into people. That's an understandable point, although I'm not sure the science backs him up on that. And my great fear is by waiting until winter, when we might have more people boosted than the people who got their booster back in November, which are the unwell, the people with immune deficiency syndromes, healthcare workers, their immunity is all going to be six months old. And you're in winter when our public hospitals are already struggling even without any COVID-19.

Is that going to be the best time to open? Probably not – and he's talking next year? You know, it just seems like it's a decision based on fear rather than on science, and I think we need to be honest with the community about what Omicron's going to mean. It's not going to be life as we've known it before. It's going to be very different. And the Premier should be listening to the WA President of the AMA who's been saying bring in the restrictions, get people used to what life is going to be like, and slowly, carefully open the borders so that we can rejoin the rest of the world. And get some workers back into WA, because we need it in pretty much every industry, but in particular, healthcare. We don't have the doctors and nurses that we need.

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: A couple of quick points there, Dr Omar Khorshid, the AMA National President. You say this is a decision based on fear rather than science. And yet, your very organisation has been, for a few months now, accused of scaremongering and spreading fear and anxiety in the community.

OMAR KHORSHID: Our organisation is focused on the health of the community, and we advocated for governments to do the right thing to protect their people. Now, we have a public hospital system that had to shut elective surgery last year for three or four months without any COVID because we did not have the capacity to deal with normal demand. So I don't think it's scaremongering to say public hospitals need to be protected, that's just the facts. Record ambulance ramping is the facts. We look at the extra burden of Omicron and think, how are we going to cope with that? But the problem is that it's coming anyway. Omicron is coming, it's...

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: [Interrupts] Well, It's here.

OMAR KHORSHID: It's here.

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: Okay. Last night the Premier said a double dose of the vaccine gives four per cent protection to Omicron, compared to 64 per cent for a triple dose for infection. Do you agree with that? And how long will it take them to get to 80 to 90 per cent triple dose, given we're currently at 25 per cent for over-16s?

OMAR KHORSHID: I don't know where you got those numbers from. I'm not aware of clinical studies that prove that the booster dose prevents you catching or transmitting Omicron. There are some studies based on antibody levels and projections, but I'm not aware of any trial that would back up that figure. And we're certainly seeing people that have been recently doubled-vaxxed, or who've been triple-vaxxed, contracting Omicron in New South Wales. That is happening. But what we can say about the vaccines is that they prevent the serious illness and hospitalisation very effectively. That's why we haven't seen tens of thousands of people ending up in hospital every day in New South Wales, which we would've with Delta with these numbers. But it means that you need more than vaccines. We need 'vaccines plus', which was always a strategy. That's what the Doherty report said, vaccines plus public health social measures. That's what New South Wales did not do, or they left it too

late. Victoria and Queensland also haven't done enough. But South Australia's been more circumspect. They've actually brought in those measures reasonably early. They've kept their Omicron outbreak at a reasonable level. The hospitals are still going to struggle, but I don't think you're going to see the impact that we're seeing in New South Wales.

NADIA MITSOPOULOS: I'll leave it there, and I do appreciate your time. A busy day for you, I'm sure. Dr Omar Khorshid there, the President of the Australian Medical Association.

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CONTACT: 02 6270 5478 0427 209 753 media@ama.com.au

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