

**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, on ABC News Breakfast, Friday, 18 February 2022

**Subject:** WA COVID cases, borders and AMA public hospital campaign.

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**HOST, LISA MILLAR:** Back to the COVID situation, and as New South Wales and Victoria relax restrictions, Western Australia is dealing with increasing cases and uncertainty over what will happen when the border eventually reopens. AMA President Omar Khorshid joins us from Perth. We've got a few things to get through because there's a bit happening in regards to the AMA. But firstly, Omar, on the border situation, the case numbers in WA, what are you reading?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Well, we're finally seeing the expected uptick in cases. As we know, Omicron spreads very quickly through communities, but for WA it's been a little bit of a different story now. Almost a couple of months into our battle with Omicron we've seen very low case numbers up til now - we still have no-one in hospital. And we've had a single death, tragically, in a patient who had Omicron, but that's a very different experience a couple of months in than what we've seen in other states. It does...

**LIS MILLAR:** [Talks over] Do we know the modelling is- there WA modelling on how that's going to progress?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Well, the modelling has been kept secret by the McGowan Government. They've not released it and they've said because it's inaccurate, which I think is really proving to be the case. Because it is baffling everyone that we've just seen relatively low numbers, and I think that points to the effectiveness of our extremely high vaccination rates. 95 per cent of people over the age of 12 with two doses, up to almost 99 per cent with a single dose, and that puts us in a unique situation worldwide as we start to battle Omicron.

**LISA MILLAR:** So does this mean that there needs to be a new reopening date for WA?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Many Western Australians are expecting and looking forward to the new opening date. Some felt somewhat betrayed by the decision not to open up as promised on 5 February despite those vaccination rates. But now that we have far more cases in the community than we're seeing coming through the borders, whether they be international or domestic, and now that we're seeing that in fact our vaccination rates are meaning that we don't have anyone in hospital. There's a couple of pretty good reasons why now is the time for us to battle Omicron rather than when it's getting closer to winter, and I think we're all hoping to see that date announced very soon.

**LISA MILLAR:** Yeah. Well, speaking of hospitals, the AMA is very concerned about the state of Australia's hospitals and you plan on wading right into the federal election campaign in regards to it?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** That's right. On Saturday I launched our public hospital campaign, which is really aimed at focusing the minds of Australians - everyday Australians - on what

has happened through Omicron as a demonstration of the pressure that our hospitals have actually been under for many years and, in fact, it's the pandemic that's demonstrated that to so many Australians. It is completely un- well, I think it's actually ridiculous that we've accepted ambulances parked outside hospitals and growing surgical waiting lists in a country that can afford the best healthcare in the world and, in fact, we have a good history of being at the top of the pile when it comes to health systems. But we can't sit back on our laurels. We've got to keep investing in healthcare, and this campaign will be asking Australians to think about hospitals, to think about their healthcare when it comes to voting on election day.

LISA MILLAR: Yeah, and so the argument always is it's a state responsibility. What's the comeback to that?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, the reality is that our hospital system is very reliant on money that comes from the Federal Government. About 45 per cent of it comes directly from the Federal Government, being, of course, the level of government that raises almost all the taxes. So it is very much a Federal Government responsibility, and although the states have to pull their weight, they have to run these systems properly and they must be held to account. The solution to a national problem is actually a national solution, so we'd really like to end the blame game, to see the Federal Government put the right amount of money in and work with the states to deliver the world's best healthcare, which I think is what all Australians want.

LISA MILLAR: Just finally, Dr Khorshid, we're often- have been told and we've seen it with the opinion polls, that people in WA have appreciated the approach that's been taken by the Premier there, that they have felt that they've been kept safe. Do you think that that mood has been changing?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, The West Australian- if you read the papers of our single local newspaper, you would certainly get that impression, and polling suggests it as well. I think a lot of Western Australians have really felt that the Premier has looked after them throughout the pandemic, but as we're seeing other states emerge from Omicron with not as much impact on communities as some were expecting and as, of course, we're getting our own experience with Omicron with far less illness and hospitalisation than was expected, people are starting to wonder whether all of this was necessary. And it's absolutely critical the Government stays honest, that it is transparent with the community, because they have made the right decisions. These have not been overreactions almost all of the way through, and to look back and say, well, we didn't need to do that, is simply wrong. And the Government, as I said, just needs to be a bit more transparent, explain their modelling, explain their decisions and be open with the community, and I think they'll keep the public's trust.

LISA MILLAR: Dr Omar Khorshid, thank you very much.

OMAR KHORSHID: Thanks, Lisa.

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