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**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Sky News, Tuesday 4 August 2020  
**Subject:** Victorian COVID restrictions, healthcare workers, border restrictions

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**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** Joining us live is the newly elected President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Omar Khorshid. Appreciate your time, Doctor.

Critics are arguing that Victoria is turning into something of a police state. We're seeing new restrictions including much tougher fines for people who flout the rules today, and now no exercise allowed for those who are meant to be self-isolating. Are those measures necessary? Are they backed by the AMA?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Unfortunately, these messages, these actions are all completely necessary, because the public has just not heeded the message so far. This virus is out there in the community, it's really dangerous, and it's putting the lives of many, many Victorians, and those of us around the rest of the country at risk if we're not able to crack down, to get the numbers down, and to keep the health system in Victoria operating properly. So, it's really tough, and we recognise there'll be a hardship for many Victorians. But if we get this done right, we can hopefully come out of this in six weeks' time and return to some semblance of normality.

**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** There is a real concern about the impact on healthcare workers in Victoria. A group of frontline workers have signed a letter of no confidence and the group of experts who are advising the Chief Medical Officer in Canberra, they want the Health Minister Greg Hunt to intervene and recommend N95 respirators, which I understand are surgical face masks that filter particles for anyone trading patients suspected of having coronavirus. Are you backing that call? Are you actively lobbying the Minister on that front? Do you have confidence in that expert panel?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** The important thing here is that healthcare workers are safe at work. They have the right to be safe at work, just like any other type of worker in any other industry. So, the N95 masks are an important way to prevent COVID-19 transmission, to protect healthcare workers. And we are unsure to what extent this virus is transmitted by aerosol as opposed to by droplets. So, it is really important that that N95s are available to any healthcare worker who is dealing with a COVID infected patient.

We are working with the Government to make sure that the recommendations have changed to really protect healthcare workers - and they've got that precautionary principle rather than just doing what we think is probably okay. We need to be sure that every healthcare worker is safe when they go to work to look after a patient who has COVID...

**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** [Interrupts] Surely, that's something, doctor, that should already be in place. Are you horrified that that isn't a measure that's being taken at this point, and are you confident the Health Minister will be intervening on that front?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** I'm confident that the Health Minister has heard the messages that have been coming from the medical profession. It is a moving beast, and the recommendations that have been in place have been there during a time when we didn't have much COVID in the community and the precautions seemed appropriate, and were backed by a lot of different players. The situation has completely changed in Victoria with the amount of COVID and a

risk to every health worker. And it's good to see that the Government are going to act. And if they don't, we'll certainly make sure they account for that.

**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** So sorry, just to clarify, your understanding is that the Government will be acting and providing those N95 respirators to all healthcare workers who are dealing with patients suspected of having coronavirus?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** We're expecting to see a shift in the position, yes. We haven't had clarification exactly what that's going to be, but certainly hoping to see some movement. Whether it will be enough, we'll have to wait and see. And if it isn't, we will certainly call Government to account. But I think there is a clear view now from the medical profession, and the AMA backs this, that we need to change these rules to reflect the changing circumstances and make sure that every single healthcare worker who attends work is actually safe and is not going to contract COVID from one of their patients.

We do recognise that some of the healthcare worker infections have come from the community and have come from dealing with other healthcare workers in non-direct clinical settings. But the reality is you've got over a thousand healthcare workers who have been infected in Victoria already. It is far too many, it decimates the workforce and it's putting lives at risk.

**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** Keen for your view on how our politicians are working during this crisis. Victoria's Upper House is sitting today despite the Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton there telling Parliamentary authorities in Victoria that it would be prudent to consider delaying the return of Parliament until new safety protocols are in place. We know that the Liberal's Upper House leader in Victoria has argued that advice was inconclusive and they decided to push on with Parliament today. On a Federal level, the Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese is arguing that Federal Parliament should be sitting by the end of the month. What's your view? Should our politicians be exempt from the rules? Do the rules and the scrutiny of the rules deserve our politicians to be at work as usual?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Our politicians have to set an example for the rest of society. So, it is very disappointing that the Victorian Upper House is sitting despite the Chief Health Officer there recommending that they pause. It makes an awful lot of sense to me to delay it, to show that the same rules apply to all Victorians, and to put in appropriate mechanisms before the other very important functions of Government get up and running again. And the same applies to the Federal Parliament. There's nothing special about politicians. They're not immune from COVID. They haven't been vaccinated, and they and their staff, can certainly transmit this virus around the country and completely decimate the economies and the populations of our state. There are ways to make it safer. There are quarantine mechanisms that can be put in place, but they need to be really stringent. And it's certainly a terrible look for there to be a different set of rules for politicians to those that apply it to the rest of us.

**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** We've seen South Australia decide to reintroduce some more restrictions despite no evidence of community spread in that State. Is that an overreaction, or would you like to see other states follow suit? I mean, your home State of WA, life's pretty much back to normal there.

**OMAR KHORSHID:** Life is pretty much back to normal in WA, but we are effectively in denial. We have eliminated the virus in the community, but we have not eliminated the threat

of COVID. And it only takes one slip up - and as we've seen in Victoria - one really tiny slip up to create carnage. And that will be amplified if we haven't got social distancing in place. So, I do support what South Australia is doing, and I think the other states need to look at Victoria and ask the very clear question of themselves: are we doing enough to make sure this could not happen in our State? Or if it did happen, that we can get control quickly and keep the population safe. Now, with almost no social distancing going on, you can't say that the State of Western Australia is in a safe place in the event that quarantine breaks down.

**ASHLEIGH GILLON:** So just to clarify, it's the AMA's position that you'd like to see restrictions reintroduced in states like WA where there isn't any community transmission at the moment?

**OMAR KHORSHID:** We need to find the balance between the economy and safety, and health. But everyone needs to remember that the worst thing for the economy is going to be an outbreak of COVID. So, it's not an either-or. We need to work with the reality of people's lives and what people will accept. But yes, the AMA is calling for all states to encourage their populations to do the right thing, to put in enough social distancing so that if the quarantine breaks, if cases do get into the community, they're able to be traced. The Health Department can find people and can ask them to isolate themselves for a couple of weeks, can do the appropriate testing, and keep the COVID outbreak under control and return back to elimination. Without a level of social distancing now, one outbreak could be completely out of control before any Government could mobilise the resources to track down those cases.

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