

Lessons from a pandemic

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Abstract

Peter Shergold and others undertook a study of Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a private report, and as such is able to make observations which would be precluded from a government report.

Introduction

The story of Australia during COVID-19 will depend on who's telling it. For some, it's a story of inconvenience. It's a narrative of cutting our own hair, struggling to exercise, and endless Zoom meetings. But for others, it's a story of trauma. It's a tale of lockdowns in overcrowded housing, job loss, deteriorating mental health, isolation and domestic violence. It's a story of losing loved ones and missing final goodbyes.

These were the heartbreaking stories Jillian Broadbent, Isobel Marshall, Peter Varghese and I¹ heard as we undertook our Independent Review into Australia's Response to COVID-19.² The Review was a first for Australia. Its terms of reference were not set by a politician. It was entirely independent of government. It was philanthropically funded. It was apolitical. The more than 350 people who participated in the Review were not compelled to appear. They did not feel obliged to defend a decision in public. Their evidence was entirely confidential. They participated because they

wanted to help answer the Review's core question: What can Australia learn from the pandemic to be better prepared for the next health crisis?

Reflections on the pandemic

We did not seek to ascribe blame. Politicians and public servants did their best in the fog of uncertainty in which they had to make decisions. We titled the Review *Fault Lines* because this is what COVID-19 exposed. The crisis exacerbated inequalities. It exposed vulnerabilities. The adverse consequences of the pandemic were not distributed equally.

Our consultations, research and analysis have led us to a number of findings and recommendations — some specifically related to health, such as the need for an Australian Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, but others that go more broadly to improve our crisis responses in a range of situations.

With towns and suburbs counting the cost of the ongoing floods, La Niña threatening much of the country over spring and summer, and the certainty of new corona-

¹ Sharon Lewin AO was initially appointed to the Panel but subsequently chose to step down to ensure there were no perceived conflicts of interest from her participation.

² Shergold, P., Broadbent, J., Marshall, I., and Varghese, P. (2022) *Fault Lines: an independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*, Analysis & Policy Observatory, October 20, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-10/apo-nid320067_o.pdf

virus variants on the horizon, we know the next crisis is never far away. Our review shows there is an urgent need to improve government decision-making through broader advice and greater transparency.

While governments need to react quickly, the COVID-19 experience too often reflected decisions made on the run by a limited group, neglecting the goldmine of experience and knowledge that business groups, frontline workers and those with lived experience can offer. When given the opportunity, businesses, unions, and civil society worked closely with government, providing real-time data and on-the-ground information about what was happening in the community. They worked hand in glove with all levels of government to identify problems and solutions to help overcome them.

Unfortunately, this close liaison often came only after problems became evident: a key reason we should establish a panel of multidisciplinary experts and representatives (not just health experts) to advise governments during crises.

We also need to publicly release the modelling and evidence used in government decision-making. Transparency creates trust, and while we all became “armchair epidemiologists” during the pandemic, information is critical to building confidence in the policy response.

Similarly, there is much we can do to improve the scope and standard of government communication. The national cabinet should expand the channels of communication in times of crisis and improve the methods of communication, particularly with those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

We also need to improve public service capability, including the collaboration of public servants across jurisdictions. Many told us that the pandemic strengthened their informal connections across jurisdictions, but that started from a low base and will probably fade again over time. They bemoaned the next crisis, which will likely see new delegates and decision-makers having to rebuild these connections from scratch.

We need to build a culture of evaluation and learning in the public sector to ensure we are making progress. Our review recommends establishing a politically independent Office of the Evaluator General to assess which policies work, which don't and how they can be improved, particularly in a crisis.

Australia got many things right in its handling of COVID-19, but we also got some major things wrong — with results that cost lives and livelihoods and will have repercussions for years to come.

We must address societal fault lines in our decision making, especially in a crisis. This was the core finding of our Review.

Australia got many things right. The financial support extended was important. So was our initial health response to such an uncertain disease. But we got four consequential matters badly wrong.

Four areas where we should have done better

First, economic supports should have been provided more fairly. Casual workers, migrants and international students should not have been excluded. Sick leave should have been immediately provided to all workers, JobKeeper should have had a clawback mechanism for employers whose profits rose significantly.

Second, lockdowns and border closures were overused. Initially these are useful measures to buy time and prepare. But many were the result of policy failures in quarantine, procurement of vaccines and equipment, contact tracing, testing and disease surveillance. Too many were guided by politics.

Third, school systems should have stayed open. Closing schools was a mistake when we knew that children were unlikely to be severely ill when infected and that schools were low-transmission environments. The costs of educational disruption and increased mental stress will continue for years.

Fourth, older Australians should have been better protected. Making it difficult for aged-care residents to transfer to hospital when they contracted COVID-19 was a mistake. It cost many lives.

Five overarching lessons

We take five lessons from these shortcomings:

- First, we must have societal fault lines front of mind when we make decisions;
- Second, we must better plan, prepare and practice for future health crises;
- Third, we must avoid the perils of over-reach;
- Fourth, we must be transparent, clear and consistent in making and communicating decisions; and
- Fifth, we must better balance competing trade-offs between health, social and economic outcomes.

It's not enough to note these lessons. Building these lessons into institutional structures is the goal of our six recommendations.

Six recommendations to put societal fault lines at the centre of improving our response to the next health crisis

First, we need to strengthen crisis preparation, planning and scenario testing. Australia's pandemic plans were not regularly tested. Many key actors didn't even know they existed. It's little wonder they were quickly discarded. Failing to plan is planning to fail.

Second, we need an expert body and trusted voice on public health. We need a fully independent Australian Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, with complete access to national data. Australia is the only OECD country that doesn't have one.³

Third, we need to improve government decision-making. We should establish a panel of multidisciplinary experts and representatives — not just health experts — to advise governments during crises. We should better harness the frontline experience of business, unions, the community sector and local government. We also need to publicly release the modelling and evidence used in government decision-making. Transparency creates trust.

Fourth, we need to enhance public service capability. It is imperative that governments authorise better collaboration between jurisdictions and strengthen their collective capabilities, particularly in data, digital skills and communication.

³ See Holmes, E. (2019) The future of biosecurity in Australia, *J. & Proc. RSNWSW*, 152: 121–128. <https://royalsoc.org.au/images/pdf/journal/152-1-Holmes.pdf>

Fifth, we need to significantly enhance how governments use data. We must improve the collection, linking and sharing of real-time data while keeping it safe and protecting privacy. Only then can we adapt our crisis response as new evidence comes to light.

Finally, we need to build a culture of evaluation and learning in the public sector. We should establish a politically independent Office of the Evaluator General to assess which policies work, which don't and how they can be improved, particularly in a crisis.

Conclusion

We must address societal fault lines in our decision-making, especially in a crisis. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities and exacerbated inequalities, with adverse consequences that were not distributed equally among us. Putting people at the centre of

our crisis response is critical. We cannot overlook those who are most vulnerable. We must apply this to the current flood situation and other crises, as history shows disaster often entrenches disadvantage and indeed often hits those who are already struggling.

It's not enough to note these lessons and let the report join others on the bookshelf. Building these lessons into institutional structures is the goal of our recommendations.

Australia's next disaster needs broad teams of experts in place and public servants who can talk easily across state and federal boundaries. The wisdom of hindsight only comes if we have the wisdom to seek it. We won't be prepared for the next pandemic if we don't learn from the current one. And one thing is certain: there will be another.

