Time to get smart about a returning citizens policy

OPINION

As an Adelaide business traveller returning home but forced to quarantine in a city with active coronavirus cases for a premium price, **Patrick Power** argues it's time Australia introduced an overseas travel policy that intelligently measures risk.

It is said that "time is a great teacher, but unfortunately it kills all its students". I have just returned from an overseas business trip and I feel caught in this paradigm.

Firstly, it is important to note that I travel for a living. I have no choice, as the CEO of an Australian company that operates internationally and employs approximately 100 Australians. I also understand and agree with the rules for returning home to Australia and the reasons behind the mandatory hotel isolation.

However, experiencing the process firsthand, Australia appears to have retained a policy that was urgently created at the beginning of the pandemic, even though it has had many months now to redesign its response into a more meaningful approach.

The reality for me is that the biggest risk to my health on this trip will be my isolation in Sydney.

I live in Adelaide, a city with no Covid and I travelled overseas to a city with essentially no Covid, yet I am being forced to isolate in Sydney, a city that actually has Covid, alongside a number of overseas travellers, many of which may have come from Covid hotspots from around the world.

Although well intentioned, it is rather difficult to understand the rationale behind this requirement.

The literature provided to me upon arrival in Sydney states that the reason for my mandatory isolation is because the majority of Covid cases in Australia are caused by international arrivals. However, whilst that response was appropriate, when viewed through the prism of the initial months of the pandemic, it should be regarded now as incredibly simplistic. With the benefit of time, how many Covid cases in Australia have been attributed to NZ or Fiji arrivals for example? I suspect none.

So why treat all international arrivals the same? Other countries have figured this out. They colour code countries into green, yellow and red, based on their Covid risk. Australia can do the same. Why not implement a revised policy that all individuals must take a Covid test at the airport upon arrival into Australia?

Individuals coming from green countries must self-isolate until they receive their negative test result; yellow countries must stay in mandatory hotel isolation for a few days until they also receive their negative test result; while anyone from red countries, or individuals testing positive from yellow countries, must stay in mandatory hotel isolation for the full 14 days.

Some will say that this model still presents a risk. Yet Australians seem willing to accept that if an Australian tests positive for Covid while in Australia, it is acceptable for that person to simply self- isolate. However, if that same Australian arrives from an overseas country that had little to no Covid, and test's negative for Covid upon arriving in Australia, that this somehow presents a greater risk to the Australian population and therefore the individual needs to be placed under 14-day mandatory hotel isolation. Unfortunately, this beggars belief.

This policy is rendered all the more difficult to comprehend when you consider the randomness of the hotel placement. Once outside the airport we were handed over to NSW police. There was no brief survey to better understand what countries we had come from, in order to risk assess individuals, or what requirements we might have. I am not 20 years old and I am not on holiday.

I am paying $3000 for a room from which I need to run my business from over the next two weeks, yet I have no desk and I can hear my neighbour on the phone or watching tv as if she was sharing my room. The room itself is available on Google for $95 per night and my breakfast on my first morning arrived at 11:45am and resembled the cold breakfast you are served on a domestic flight that comes in those little boxes. There is one guard on the floor and no housekeeping. In other words, the math doesn't add up.

As for my departure, my entire business trip was planned around being home for Father's Day. Yet even though I will have done my 14 nights in mandatory hotel quarantine, and my pre-departure quarantine check is the day before, I am told that I can only leave the hotel between 4-6pm, which means I miss the only flight to Adelaide, which is at 2:45 pm every day. Whilst I have been provided with dozens of pages of information regarding my mandatory hotel isolation, there is not a single phone number or email that I can contact in order to request permission to leave three hours earlier.

To close, I'm certain many Australians reading this will simply say the rules apply to everyone so I should stop complaining. However, as an employer, I do not collect the JobKeeper allowance from the government. Instead I am doing what I need to do to keep my Australian staff employed.

Like everyone, I live in hope that this pandemic is nearing an end. However, hope is not a plan.

The Australian government has done an excellent job to date navigating the perils of the pandemic but given the benefit of time, and the fact that this pandemic may be with us for the foreseeable future, the government owes Australians an intelligent overseas travel policy.

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