

Supplementary Submission on Pandemic Response to the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety

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We just noticed that today is the last day for submissions to the Royal Commission. Hence this supplementary submission on epidemic response:

1. The Commonwealth should fund a post-pandemic study of which countries had the lowest proportion of COVID-19 deaths in aged care and how those countries had prepared to deliver that result.
2. This links to points made in our 2019 Submission. The pandemic has shown the need for finer, more transparent data across all aged care providers regardless of jurisdiction as an early warning device, to monitor transmission rates, evaluate what is working and not, and harnessed to open source data so the wider academic research community can assist in novel applications of data analytics which day to day care providers don't have the time or skills to do. Routine real time collection is better than a scramble to collate and clean monitoring data in the middle of future crises.
3. Emergency funding should have been mobilized in Australia to attract retired nurses from February 2020, especially with expertise in infection control and occupational health, for a year of aged care service until a vaccine arrived.
4. Emergency funding should have been mobilized to TAFE to train new aged care assistants in February. This could have been a one-month crash course initially with a lot of emphasis on infection control. In states where the pandemic did not take off quickly, this could have been flexibly designed for a second month of training before the care assistants were thrown onto the front line. This care assistant training could have been aligned with funding for TAFE in pandemic infection control for aged care managers and senior aged care nurses. Australia obviously needs a larger trained aged care workforce in the decades ahead. Such emergency training assistance and work experience in tough conditions would have equipped large numbers of young Australians for future jobs they were otherwise unprepared to fill.
5. While funding for more jobs in aged care is expensive, the people of Australia should be helped by the Royal Commission to think about the value of this for the economy in the years ahead when unemployment rates will be high. A strong economy is the cornerstone of our national security as discussed in the next paragraph. Another imperative for our national security from bushfires and other threats is to shift the shape of the economy to more employment in industries like aged care that do not increase Australia's carbon footprint.
6. In light of the demonstration of how an accidental epidemic can be so devastating for the national health and the national economy, Australian policymakers must now

ponder future national security risks from intentionally threatened future epidemics aimed at devastating Australia's healthcare workforce. There is a case for shifting some of the national security budget from building hardware such as submarines and missiles to hardening our national health care system as a future target of intentional epidemic dispersal. Missiles can spread thousands of pods of biological agents on cities; we must now consider this a more attractive threat in the future for aggressive states or terrorists who are their proxies. At this point in time, it is unlikely Australia would be targeted in this way; but nor is Australia likely to suffer nuclear attack or invasion during the next decade. Australian casualties as collateral damage in fallout or famine from an accidental or intentional nuclear war between India and Pakistan, or North Korea and others, are somewhat higher risks. We cannot protect ourselves against that with Australian submarines; we can by being properly prepared for a surge of trained healthcare staff in the event of a nuclear war between other countries that catastrophically impacts the climate and economy in Australia. Why not consider diverting a small proportion of funding for protection against attack by explosive weapons to funding defence of the health care system against a climate catastrophe, nuclear wars in other parts of the planet that cause ecosystem collapse in Australia, against biological weapons that threaten Australia, against the growing globalization of disease, indeed against all kinds of future catastrophic threats. While Australia waits for future catastrophes that we hope will never happen, a national security investment in a more resilient health and aged care workforce delivers Australians a better life and a stronger economy during the years when we are free of pandemics and wars. Building a few more submarines does not.