



So Slow On The Jab, We Need War Effort To End Pandemic

Publish Date:

March 2021

Brisbane has been plunged into another snap lockdown after COVID-19 slipped into the community through an inexplicably unvaccinated doctor and nurse. Australia's borders remain closed and tens of thousands are trapped overseas. Winter, with a higher transmission risk, is coming.

Australia is stuck in COVID purgatory: lockdowns and domestic border closures at any moment, lives and livelihoods at risk, and no end to the mayhem.

Scientists have come through with a miraculous solution to this conundrum: vaccines. Yet Australia's vaccination program is pathetically slow, unambitious and behind schedule. At the current rate, the most vulnerable will not be vaccinated until June 2023 and the full population not until October 2024. Every previous target has been missed and every upcoming target will be missed. The first modest goal, 60,000 doses by the end of February, was only half achieved. The next target of four million by the end of March will be missed by over three-quarters. The government has admitted the program will not be completed by October as planned.



This is no longer just a matter of supply. Australia has used just half a million doses of the more than two million in the country. There are a million locally manufactured coming each week. A mere half of the doses provided last week were used. The system isn't operating at speed. Australia is suffering from an epidemic of hubris. Health Department secretary Brendan Murphy says "we are not in a hurry in Australia".

This pandemic comes in two acts. In the first act, Australia did well protecting lives. But stringent border controls and a suppression strategy only made sense to buy time for vaccines.

Now, in the second and final act, Australia is seriously faltering. Slow and steady will not win the race. Slow vaccinations are delaying the return to normality.

Israel has vaccinated 30 times more people per capita than Australia. The UK has done 22 times more, and the US 14 times more. Even the French, who have been criticised for their relative slowness, have done six times more.

In the not too distant future other developed nations will be fully reopened, freely travelling and living life completely normally. Australia risks becoming a hermit kingdom with closed borders and fearful of outsiders for years to come.

Our governments had a year to prepare for these vaccines. Yet they have dramatically underperformed on arrival.

The regulator took months longer than international equivalents to approve vaccines. Scott Morrison raised doubts in Australia and insulted key allies by insinuating overseas rollouts were unsafe and rushed. He should instead have been learning from their faster approaches.

The national vaccine booking system launched last week was slammed for being unready, with a key technology partner only involved this month. GPs have complained about not being told when and how many vaccines would be arriving, making it difficult to plan appointments. They have also raised concerns about low payments that will not cover costs to open out of hours and on weekends. Some are expected to quit the program, reducing access.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has complained about being "held back" because of the slowness of other states, as well as the federal government preventing NSW from keeping open vaccination hubs. Australia needs a radical new approach to vaccinations that treats this like a national emergency. We need a war effort, involving every part of society, to end this pandemic. Now that domestic vaccine supplies are secured, Australia should adopt a UK-style first doses strategy by using all stocks immediately to save the most lives.

After spending billions on support programs and hundreds of thousands losing their job, it makes no sense to cut corners in ending the pandemic.

GPs should be offered whatever is necessary. Community pharmacies should be immediately included. No jab should ever be unused: waiting lists of nearby residents or people from the street



should be offered spare doses at the end of each day.

Mass vaccination centres should be established at convention centres, community halls and sports stadiums — open every day to avoid the current weekend dips. There should also be drive-through centres and mobile units. This should be supported by assembling an army of volunteers.

Australia should pay for AstraZeneca and CSL to accelerate and increase production in Melbourne, including 24/7 manufacturing. Any spare doses can be provided to countries in the Pacific like Papua New Guinea, Fiji and New Zealand.

We also need greater transparency: daily updates on available and used vaccines, a detailed outline of upcoming deliveries. If states are struggling to deliver, military logisticians should be called up. Australia has immense wealth and abilities. We are the lucky country, being let down by a second-rate vaccination program. It is time for a national effort to end this pandemic.

Originally published in:

The Australian

Original Link:

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/so-slow-on-the-jab-we-need-war-effort-to-end-pandemic/news-story/d140aa78863a6be6fd1f60750eb49466>