

SURVEY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIAN'S EXPERIENCE WITH COVID-19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The origins of the Covid-19 pandemic and measures taken globally and in Australia to combat it are described. Three waves of the pandemic have occurred in Australia, the third occurring in NSW during the time of the survey. By early October 2021, over 113,000 had been infected Australia-wide and 1,350 had died from Covid-19. The Case Fatality Ratio (deaths as % of infected cases) at the end of September 2021 globally was 2.05% whereas in Australia it was nearly half that at 1.24% and lower still in South Australia, 0.44% – one of the lowest in the world. South Australia has had 4 deaths and 900 cases.

The Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines were approved for use in early 2021 and by October 2021, 56% of the eligible population in Australia had received two doses. Out of these, adverse reactions were experienced by only 0.24% which included headaches, muscle pain, fever, chills and injection site reactions.

While the Commonwealth Government has been responsible for obtaining the vaccines from overseas, the States and Territories have administered the vaccination programs. A National Cabinet comprising the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Chief Ministers has coordinated the Covid program.

Previous national surveys

National surveys of the household impact of Covid have been conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and other bodies. The surveys indicated that the social, financial and personal cost of the Covid-19 pandemic may not be as bad as originally expected. The number with jobs had increased, personal finances for most had remained stable, and the number experiencing psychological stress was a relatively low 20%. High levels of personal hygiene together with high levels of flu vaccination, probably account for the record low number of flu infections in Australia. Positive aspects of the pandemic were the slower pace experienced by the community although loneliness and boredom were experienced by some.

Origins of the survey

A search of Royal Geographical Society of South Australia (RGSSA) publications at the

time of the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918 -19 found no record of that tragic event. In view of this, a survey of members during the current Covid-19 pandemic was conducted in September 2020 to provide a record for posterity. Twelve months on with the Covid pandemic showing no sign of abating, a second survey was run of householder's experience of Covid. This time it would be open to all South Australians, not just members of the RGSSA.

Preparation of the survey

In preparing the survey, many of the questions were based on those used by the ABS in their fortnightly surveys. The survey covered:

1. Respondent characteristics
2. Response to the 7-day lockdown
3. Covid vaccine
4. Workplace
5. Precautions
6. Finances
7. Activities
8. Stress and mental health
9. Communications
10. Management of Covid-19
11. Future

The survey was launched on 4 August and ran for 52 days to 24 September 2021. Publicity about the survey was largely achieved through letterboxing thousands of homes in Adelaide and in some country towns.

Survey participants

The survey sample comprised 400 respondents and was dominated by elderly, highly educated couples and singles most of whom were retired and lived in Adelaide. Participants were highly qualified with 42% having higher degrees compared with less than 6% for the community.

Survey findings

Lockdown

A minority of respondents found the week-long lockdown in July difficult while 50% found it easy. Comments about the lockdown were overwhelmingly positive comprising nearly two thirds and only 19% were negative about it. Comments on the lockdown included attending to the garden and the house, relief that the Olympics were on television, and awareness of the risks of meeting other people. Many

reported on their particular circumstances which made the ban on visiting family difficult.

Vaccines

Regarding vaccines, 80% of the sample had been vaccinated, most with two inoculations of the AstraZeneca vaccine with protection of themselves and the community being the main reason and avoiding catching the virus the next most common reason. The 19% who had not been vaccinated cited concern that it had not been adequately tested and about possible side effects.

However nearly half chose 'other' reasons which, based on comments they posted included concern about blood clots and allergies, belief that the vaccine is a "rat experiment" or "untested genetic therapy" which will cause harm, and a feeling that they are being pressured to take the vaccine. Of those who indicated they were not vaccinated half said that they were going to be. A few said they preferred the Pfizer vaccine but were prevented from having it. Several expressed strong objections to the vaccines.

Nearly 80% of the sample was aware of counter theories (i.e. conspiracy theories) about Covid with 76% giving them very little or no credence. However nearly 10% gave them a great deal or fair bit of credence and 4% believed the pandemic to be a hoax. However, 93% believed it to be real. There were many comments about awareness of counter theories, but only 12 persons admitted to believing the theories. The comments revealed a general belief that the virus emanated from the Wuhan laboratory.

Most were dismissive of believers in conspiracy theories and to believe the experts in the health area. Although virtually all the comments were that the pandemic is real, many were concerned about the response of Governments to it as being an over-reaction, particularly lockdowns.

Analysis of the 35 persons who believed in counter theories found an equal number of males and females, two thirds were aged 65 and older, and all but three had qualifications with 10 having a higher degree or graduate diploma and 7 having a degree. Although they believed in the counter theories, 24 of them said the pandemic was real, not a hoax.

Workplace

189 work and around 70% said they can and do work from home. A quarter of these work 5

days a week from home but for nearly half, the number of days varies week by week.

Precautions

Hand washing and wearing face masks gained the highest frequency followed by avoiding public transport and people and disinfecting surfaces. Buying extra toilet paper (!), getting home deliveries and buying more medical supplies were the least actioned. Generally, the comments expressed obedience to the requirements for face masks, social distancing etc although some thought them overkill.

Finances

Respondents were asked about the status of their finances and while for two thirds their finance had stayed the same, 19% said that they had improved while 15% said they had worsened. While some had experienced large changes to their finances, for the majority the change was neutral or small. A quite high 13% had accessed their superannuation funds for additional finance.

Activities

The most popular activities were walks (11%) followed by exercise, gardening, cooking, more TV and computing, and meeting with family and friends. Relatively few, <3%, admitted to consuming more alcohol.

Stress and mental health

The most severe stressors were loneliness followed by health concerns and not being able to get a job, findings which parallel those of the ABS surveys. Around 8% of respondents suffered severe psychological distress, substantially lower than the 20% national figure from the ABS. The mental health for 10% of respondents was poor or very poor, much less than the 20% experienced nationally in the ABS survey.

Some respondents spoke of their existing health complaints, losing their jobs, and not being able to see their family or friends, particularly those from interstate. The restrictions associated with the pandemic have caused some stress including loneliness. Many respondents spoke of their existing psychological distress to which the pandemic added a further dimension. The continuous media cover of Covid which always tended to be bad reinforced the distress.

Based on previous academic research and its use by the ABS, the next question asked respondents to rate how nervous, hopeless, restless, depressed or worthless they felt over the previous 4 weeks. Compared with the ABS

findings, the survey found hopelessness and worthlessness were similar, restlessness was lower, nervousness was much lower and depression was higher.

Asked about the level of their social support, the majority, 75%, had adequate or sufficient social support while 12% had insufficient or very insufficient support. Keeping in contact with family and friends through phone and other means was common.

Communications

Respondents were asked about the adequacy of their phone, texting, email, and community online communications. All were adequate with bad or very bad communications being a minor issue. Similarly, the information communicated about Covid was generally found to be adequate with less than 14% finding it inadequate.

Management of Covid-19

There was a high level of satisfaction with the South Australian Government, much less for the Commonwealth Government, and an even positive and negative responses for the National Cabinet, possibly because respondents did not understand what it was.

Half the respondents agreed with the decision to refuse to give New South Wales vaccines to help them through a Covid outbreak but 20% disagreed. A large group were undecided.

Comments on Covid management included strong passions when commenting on the Federal Government and the NSW and Victorian Governments. The National Cabinet was seen as dividing the nation rather than uniting it. The media also came in for criticism for unbalanced and sensationalist reporting.

Future

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about whether 2022 would be better than 2021, though a large group thought it would be similar. Many believed the future depended on everyone being vaccinated and they hoped the future would be better but were unsure. Living with Covid in the future was a recurring theme.

Conclusions

Compared with the lack of knowledge during the 2018-19 Spanish Flu Pandemic about how to deal with it, the world has come a great distance with knowledge of genetics, DNA, vaccines, and how to prevent the spread. This translated into the rapid identification of the virus's genome and the rapid development of vaccines. Speed of response, closing of

international and state borders, and vaccinations have retarded its spread in Australia. Although Australia with 25 million people has had 1,400 deaths, this number pales against those in many countries, e.g. the Netherlands with 17 million people has had 19,000 deaths.

Truly Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* applied to Australia during this pandemic. While infections and deaths have been minimal, relative to other countries, this survey shows that some people have suffered significantly mentally, socially and financially. While most have been vaccinated, there remains a small core of people who refuse the vaccine and a smaller number who hold to the various conspiracy theories that abound.

Governments and the community will seek to learn the lessons from the pandemic in the years ahead. While the WHO has issued a guidance document for pandemics, there are many lessons for Australia including better coordination between governments and faster response by governments, improved information dissemination about the vaccines and their efficacy including use of the social media platforms to spread this information and wider translations into all the languages, including indigenous, current in Australia.

Capacity development of the means for manufacturing vaccines in Australia should be among the list of lessons. Hospitals and emergency departments need to be capable of rapid expansion during a pandemic.

It is hoped that the results of this survey may feed into the process of learning the lessons from Covid-19 in preparation for the next pandemic which *will* come, not 'if' but 'when'.