

Learning to live with COVID is STILL not a viable option

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Learning to die from Covid on a road to nowhere

The current spin that 'we need to learn to live with Covid' actually means that we need to learn to die from Covid. The UK Covid death toll of 130,000 would translate to 10,000 deaths in New Zealand. Peru, the worst hit country, has the equivalent of 30,000 New Zealand deaths.

The related spin is that we need a roadmap out of Covid. Unfortunately, there are no safe (i.e. evidence-based) roads out yet, just some dangerous tracks that many politicians worldwide feel pressured to choose from and hope for the best. The Dutch prime minister has just apologized for an error of judgement in relaxing restrictions three weeks ago which has led to 10,000 new daily cases, the highest count since December. The New South Wales Deputy Premier recently acknowledged that the state had lost control of the latest outbreak, admitting that there is no rule book and in retrospect they should have locked down sooner. Boris Johnson plans to open the UK up completely, despite 30,000 new cases per day. It's like building a road to the edge of a wasteland, then providing a roadmap showing that the road continues (and with no speed limit), when it doesn't even exist.

New Zealand remains an outlier because our politicians understand there is no safe road out of Covid yet. We slowed right down where the road ended and are cautiously edging forward, at a pace the majority of us are comfortable with, but a vocal minority are not. We live virtually free of restrictions within our borders and according to most national and international economic authorities (not my area of expertise), our economy is doing as well as or better than most countries but without the deaths, disease and related disruptions. Most reputable economists agree you cannot have a healthy economy without a healthy population.

Yet, if you listen to some commentators, you would think our Covid elimination strategy is an unmitigated disaster. They seem unaware of the devastating effects of driving blindly into the Covid wasteland, with each new Covid variant like a new crevasse suddenly opening up in front of us. A death from Covid-19 is just the tip of an iceberg, or edge of a cliff. There are 5 to 20 hospitalizations for every Covid death and each Covid-related hospital patient requires much more time and resource than other patients. Our hospitals are hardly coping with the current winter influx of respiratory infections; a Covid outbreak would be a complete disaster.

The key blind spot of 'learn to live with Covid' commentators is a failure to understand 'exponential spread.' Without restrictions Covid-19 will spread exponentially. If one person infects two others, the numbers rapidly increase from 1 to 2, to 4, 8, 16, 32, to 64. If one person infects three others (it may be six for the Delta variant), these numbers go from 1 to 3, to 9, 27, 81, 243, to 729 over the same time period an earlier variant took to reach 64. That's why it's not possible to live with a little bit of Covid and why most countries are not coping. Moreover, no country has yet experienced the full impact of exponential spread, because every country has significant restrictions, either imposed by the state or self-imposed by individuals. Most of my UK colleagues have been working from home since March 2020.

We cannot afford to take the risks that some business people are requesting without potentially fatal consequences. While taking risks in business is often necessary, you can recover from bankruptcy but not from death. Our government has been criticized for not taking sufficient advice from business, but given our success to date, perhaps the balance about right and they have taken advice from the right business people. I recently read an article by Rob Fyfe, ex-CEO of Air New Zealand, that I could have written myself, probably because he comes from a business where safety is paramount. He understands that taking risks, and putting profit before people, can cause hundreds of deaths, as happened with the Boeing 737 Max.

A roadmap out of Covid is just not available yet, but the best way to prepare is with a vaccination safety belt. While people are understandably worried about possible vaccine side-effects, experience from a century of vaccinations demonstrates that nearly all important side-effects occur within weeks of vaccination. With over 3 billion Covid-19 vaccine doses given already, we know that significant side-effects are extremely rare. Covid-19 will be around for many years, so until almost every eligible New Zealander is vaccinated, the road ahead will be dangerous and our borders must remain tightly controlled.