New modeling highlights risk in Australia's national COVID plan

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Australia's National Plan to relax COVID-19 restrictions puts too many lives at risk and could hamper thousands more Australians with ongoing illness, according to new modeling from researchers.

The researchers argue that at least 90 percent of all Australians, including children, must be vaccinated against COVID-19 before fully

relaxing public health measures and opening the international border.

Professor Quentin Grafton from The Australian National University, Dr. Zoë Hyde from the University of Western Australia and Professor Tom Kompas from the University of Melbourne examined the Australian Government's National Plan to reduce restrictions once enough adults are vaccinated.

Under the National Plan, once more than 80 percent of adults receive two doses of COVID-19 vaccines, equivalent to approximately 65 percent of the total population, the nation will "manage COVID-19 consistent with public health management of other infectious diseases."

Professor Grafton said the new modeling showed "we simply can't afford to do that, both in terms of lives and long-term illness from COVID."

"We found substantial morbidity and mortality is likely to occur if the Australian Government sticks to the National Plan," he said.

"Our modeling shows if 70 percent of Australians over 16 years of age are fully vaccinated, with a 95 percent vaccination level for those aged 60 years and over, there could eventually be some 6.9 million symptomatic COVID-19 cases, 154,000 hospitalizations, and 29,000 fatalities.

"And assuming 80 percent vaccination coverage for only those over 16, as per the National Plan, there could be approximately 25,000 fatalities and some 270,000 cases of long COVID.

"In contrast, and if children are also fully vaccinated, national fatalities for all age groups would be reduced to 19,000 with 80 percent adult vaccination coverage. This would fall to 10,000 at a 90 percent adult

vaccination coverage.

"Children also directly benefit from vaccination. If we could achieve 75 cent vaccination coverage among children and adolescents, we could prevent 12,000 hospitalisations in these age groups."

The researchers argue four key steps must be taken before "exposing Australians to uncontrolled COVID-19."

These include:

- Vaccinating both children and adolescents;
- Reaching 95 percent full vaccination among people 60 and older as well as other vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;
- Giving an mRNA booster shot to all Australians vaccinated with AstraZeneca, as well as a booster shot to those vaccinated with an mRNA vaccine, when appropriate; and
- Reaching more than 90 percent vaccination coverage among all Australians.

"The consequences of prematurely and fully relaxing public health measures to suppress COVID-19, even after vaccinating 80 percent of adults, would likely be irreversible, and unacceptable to many Australians," Dr. Hyde said.

"Even if the country achieves the four steps we are calling for, fully relaxing public health measures to eliminate community transmission could still, eventually, result in some 5,000 fatalities and 40,000 cases of long COVID.

"For all these reasons and more, it's simply too dangerous to treat

COVID-19 like the flu.

"We also can't forget about our children, who can get very sick from this virus and need protection before we open up."

Professor Kompas said the Australian Government still has an opportunity to devise "a safe and affordable transition to a 'post-COVID-19' era."

"Our projections of hospitalizations and fatalities would have been even worse if we had used the higher preliminary estimates of the increased virulence of the Delta variant," he said.

"This means our projections likely represent a lower estimate of the cumulative public health outcomes of fully relaxing public health measures at Phase D of the National Plan, or sooner, if outbreaks are not effectively suppressed or eliminated.

"If National Cabinet revises its strategy to include our four vaccination steps, many lives will be saved, and many more, including children, will not suffer from debilitating long COVID."

More information: The new modeling is available online as a pre-print publication at osf.io/6j4rd/

Provided by Australian National University

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