

5th December 2020

The Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
C/- The Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
PO BOX 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA 2600

via email: covid.sen@aph.gov.au

RE: Submission to the senate select committee on government response to the coronavirus pandemic – hotel quarantine

I am a public health researcher, and am writing to express my concerns over the hotel quarantine scheme in Australia after a family member recently went through the quarantine system, and the COVID-19 outbreak from Peppers Waymouth Hotel, in Adelaide, has further heightened my concern. I am also writing with some specific suggestions for how to address these problems.

My specific concerns relate to:

- the lack of access to fresh air and exercise breaks for returned travellers, breaching recommendations and human rights; and
- the use of hotels for quarantine no longer being an appropriate solution for managing returned travellers.

As health experts have advised, the need for quarantine systems to be tightly managed is vital in order to minimise the risk of COVID-19 cases spilling into the community, and to protect the health and wellbeing of returned travellers.

While Australia's response to the pandemic has been strong, and I have no doubt that the hotel quarantine scheme has prevented many COVID-19 cases and deaths in Australia, the aforementioned events have highlighted some deficiencies in the hotel quarantine scheme that I believe should be addressed critically. As the capacity for international arrivals into Australia is increased, deficiencies in the hotel quarantine scheme are now the greatest risk to the community.

It is time to change gear from the temporary system we have now and ensure appropriate and permanent solutions are found to protect us for the long-haul.

Permanent quarantine systems are required

The current stop-gap system for containing a global pandemic are placed in the highest risk areas of our communities, in multiple locations around the centre of our most populous cities. This, combined with staffing arrangements (i.e. temporary workers) that create the highest frequency of contact to and from the high-risk workplace to the local community, is probably the riskiest solution to the problem.

Hotels, especially in population dense city centres, are not designed for quarantine. While they may have been appropriate in the early stages of the pandemic because of their convenient location, close proximity to major hospitals, it is no longer appropriate to be using them as such. After nine months of dealing with the pandemic, we should be in a position to ensure quarantine systems are appropriate for the long-term situation we are in.

I urge you to explore and advocate for alternative repurposed or purpose-built permanent facilities, such as using transportable buildings similar to those in mining camps, with permanent, well-trained staff and the ability for returned travellers to open doors, windows and get fresh air.

This will be a worthwhile investment given that we will be using such facilities for the foreseeable future and the costs of uncontrolled spread, as shown by Victoria, are far too high.

Health and wellbeing of returned travellers

At the same time as protecting the community from COVID-19 via quarantine programs, it is imperative to protect the health and wellbeing of returned travellers, not just from COVID-19 but other stressors related to quarantine.

Quarantine is a demanding challenge and, while a necessary public health burden to bear, it can also result in psychological distress¹ for those who undergo it.

While the current hotels used to accommodate returned travellers in Australia are generally comfortable, and the food and friendliness of the staff far better than could be expected, as recounted by my family member, the lack of fresh air and exercise is hugely detrimental to their wellbeing and impedes their ability to cope with the 14 days in quarantine.

My family member was accommodated for seven nights in a small room that did not have access to any fresh air, and was not permitted to leave the room for fresh air breaks or exercise. After many attempts at discussing this with hotel staff and management, he was moved to a balcony room by a manager who listened to his concerns and went around the current system to implement. Access to fresh air made a huge difference to his wellbeing for the remainder of his quarantine.

It is likely that some returned travellers may not have the confidence or communication skills necessary to advocate for their own health, and may suffer in silence for the duration, which will likely leave them with long-lasting effects from the ordeal.

To help minimise the detrimental health effects from quarantine, I urge you to consider accommodating all returned travellers in rooms or facilities with balconies, windows that open and a room large enough area to do some basic exercise.

The National review of hotel quarantine recommends that “hotel infrastructure should enable access to open spaces and fresh air”² and the Queensland Human Rights Commission has recently ruled on a complaint and now recommend that all hotels used for hotel quarantine should have balconies or windows that open, concluding

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)

² <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/10/national-review-of-hotel-quarantine.pdf>

³ https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/28703/2020.10.15-Media-statement-Commission-releases-first-report-on-unresolvable-human-rights-complaint.pdf

⁴ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/covid-19-information>

⁵ <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/6-key-principles-to-guide-the-victorian-governments-response-to-covid-19/>

that “lack of fresh air is a significant human rights issue and one that we sincerely hope is addressed as a matter of priority.”³

On the Australian Human Rights website, it states this about hotel quarantine: *“Other than restrictions on movement necessary to ensure public health, you should be able to access all other rights as you would if you were quarantined in your own home.”*⁴

Good communication is vital

Communication, in the form of accessible information about the hotel quarantine scheme and appropriate channels to voice concerns, was another issue experienced by my family member. Again, if my family member had issues communicating his needs during quarantine, then it is highly likely that other travellers lack the required skills in advocating for their health and wellbeing.

As per the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, if rights and freedoms are being limited for the betterment of public health, they must be proportionate, time-bound, lawful, scrutinised and **transparent**. People must also be able to easily voice their concerns.⁵

Potential suggestions to improve communication channels and information include:

- Provision of an easy to read document (accessible for all literacy-levels and languages) outlining the quarantine process, requirements and justification for the limitations on individual freedoms.
- Provision of contact details for the relevant individuals and departments for returned travellers to voice their concerns (i.e. state health departments, Human Rights Commission).
- Implementing a state government health department staff member to act as a hotel quarantine guest adviser/communications officer to ensure everyone has one representative they can access for consistent, clear and transparent information.

As more Australians return home, future international travellers are considered (such as international students), and state borders reopen, the emergency system implemented at the beginning of the pandemic is no longer appropriate. I urge you to advocate for a permanent quarantine system to prevent further COVID-19 outbreaks and maintain the health and wellbeing of returned travellers.

I look forward to your prompt reply, and would be happy to meet with you or a staff member to discuss this further.

Thank you and kind regards
Alison
Columnist, Croakey Health Media

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)

² <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/10/national-review-of-hotel-quarantine.pdf>

³ https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/28703/2020.10.15-Media-statement-Commission-releases-first-report-on-unresolvable-human-rights-complaint.pdf

⁴ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/covid-19-information>

⁵ <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/6-key-principles-to-guide-the-victorian-governments-response-to-covid-19/>