

# Rebels with a cause

## When jobsworths deny the truthsayers, we are poorer for it

**ANDREW MILLER**



It was inevitable that my colleague and friend David Berger was going to cop some flak. Thinkers like him are the irritating sand in society's orderly oyster.

As a rural generalist physician, he fronts up to the trenches in isolated health services around the country, often with no big hospital closer than a three-hour flight away.

He calls a spade a spade, rather than a single-operator soil relocation device. Fools best avoid him, because the diagnosis will be rapid and forthright.

Whether it's Maverick buzzing the tower in an F-14, Ferris Bueller borrowing a Ferrari, or Maria singing in the Abbey, we admire brave individuals who refuse to mindlessly bend their knee to the powers that be wrong.

In a world of stultifying bureaucracy, we have a complicated relationship with these rebels who refuse to accept mediocrity.

They provide schadenfreude relief for us, when it seems our truth-telling larrikins were all thrown out with the misogynistic, racist bathwater.

However, we often stand back as they are punished.

The reason most of us do not rush to help them is that the costs of acting on your instinct to "do the right thing" or "speak your mind" can be high.

"If we just let everyone do what they want, then everything will be in chaos!" says the compliance department.

True, but that's a straw man — my argument is that it does

not benefit the community when dissenting commentators are silenced for technical fouls, while their good points are ignored.

Especially when they are being singled out not because they are damaging patients, but because they have embarrassed authority figures by speaking truth out loud.

No physician argues that SARS-Cov-2 is not airborne in 2022, but some "do-you-know-who-I-am" professors and government boot-licks sure did for two years, and they mostly still have taxpayer funded velvet under their bums, despite doubling-down on that fatal error.

A former director of the British Medical

Journal with a polymathic world perspective, Berger, pictured, contacted me early in 2020, and we co-wrote to many authorities, requesting that healthcare workers be provided proper protection from airborne SARS-Cov-2.

We were initially rebuffed, ignored and pilloried; told to stay in our lane.

There were plenty with appropriate expertise saying they were wrong, such as hitherto obscure experts in aerosol transmission of viral particles, and occupational medicine.

Along with many of us, Berger has publicly disputed the "mild Omicron for Christmas" narrative; the myth that children have nothing to fear from COVID; and repudiated calls to "live with it", which

is code for "unmask, vaccinate occasionally and get reinfected often, no matter how many get sick or die".

After an anonymous complaint was made to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, about his entertaining, occasionally swears, tweets he has to do a course "in relation to behaving professionally and courteously to colleagues and other practitioners".

Respectfully, is this focus on how we say things, rather than what we say, really going to keep the community safer?

Is being "courteous to colleagues", even prize buffoons, more important than calling out bulls.t?

This a relatively low-impact condition, but it could have a stifling effect on not just him, but thousands of future calls for safety from less daring frontline workers who see dodgy management practices that should be exposed.

No one wants any sort of attention from an all-powerful regulator.

Health system managers and politicians are hardly doing such a great job that they deserve any cover of silence provided by tone-policing.

Judging by the furious multinational response to news of Berger's sanction, his ideas remain important to thousands of colleagues and patients.

No one will blame him if he flies off into the sunset in his crazy-brilliant seaplane; he wouldn't be the first unappreciated lifesaver to quietly slip away. I hope not. Good-trouble makers and dissenters prepared to speak up are our best hope for clever solutions to many problems in our struggling public health systems.



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