

Right-wing Australian “medical network” opposes pandemic lockdowns and advocates herd immunity

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The Therapeutics Good Administration, the Australian government’s medical goods regulator, issued a “cease and desist” order last month against the COVID Medical Network (CMN) in response to CMN’s promotion of drugs that have been proven ineffective, and in some cases dangerous, for the treatment of COVID-19.

CMN is a right-wing group that opposes pandemic lockdowns and advocates herd immunity. Articles posted on CMN’s website also declare that vaccines rarely give more protection than the disease itself—a statement that is patently false.

The CMN was formed last year, ostensibly in response to a four-month lockdown in the state of Victoria, which eventually ended a COVID outbreak that peaked at 700 cases per day and threatened to overwhelm the under-resourced public hospitals. The CMN claimed that lockdowns are “doing more harm than good” and “will cause more deaths and negative health effects than the virus itself.”

While purporting to be concerned about public health, a review of CMN’s website and policy statement reveals it is an advocate for the unrestricted spread of COVID. It opposes lockdowns, vaccinations and mask wearing, demands the re-opening of schools and advances bogus treatments for the disease.

Governments all over the world have pursued the policy of herd immunity. It prioritises business profits over lives by forcing workers prematurely back to work. The result has been resurgences of the pandemic and a catastrophe for the international working class, with more than 123 million infections and 2.7 million deaths worldwide so far.

The CMN policy statement aligns with the Great

Barrington Declaration, published last October by the pro-business American Institute for Economic Research, which calls for COVID to be allowed to infect younger people in order to build up a so-called herd immunity, while supposedly offering protections to the elderly.

CMN claims that any attempt to eliminate community transmission of coronavirus by lockdowns and vaccinations is “both irrational and unachievable.” No credible medical organisation or authority has endorsed this view. The World Health Organisation has described herd immunity by exposure to the virus as “scientifically problematic and unethical.” Last year, the Australian Medical Association, the main doctors’ group, denounced CMN’s opposition to lockdowns as “fatally flawed.”

Genuine herd immunity refers to the process by which a nearly completely vaccinated population is able to suppress the virus. Vaccines are the only safe method to developing immunity, and this has been understood for decades. Great Barrington and its advocates are calling for the opposite—a policy in which the vast majority of people are exposed to the actual virus, leading to high rates of death and disability. Moreover, any COVID mutations would nullify the supposed advantages of contracting the virus.

While genuine elimination will ultimately require mass vaccination, lockdowns have been demonstrated as crucial in slowing and suppressing viral spread. A study of 41 countries conducted by an international team of researchers from Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford and the Australian National University concluded that closures were one of the most effective means to lower the rate of COVID transmission.

Lockdowns are necessary because COVID-19 has a demonstrated reproduction rate ranging from 3 to 5 persons, meaning every infected person risks infecting that many others. The experience of China, where the first outbreak of COVID was recorded, proves the efficacy of a combination of lockdowns, strict quarantines, widespread testing and extensive contact tracing.

Among the CMN's "cures" for COVID are ivermectin (an anti-parasitic medication) and hydroxychloroquine (an anti-malarial and immune system suppressant). These have demonstrated no anti-COVID properties, despite multiple studies investigating them. The key research paper touted by CMN to demonstrate hydroxychloroquine's usefulness was published in the research journal owned by its lead author Peter McCullough, exposing it as a sham.

Significantly, the latter drug was regularly promoted by Donald Trump, and far-right Australian parliamentarians Craig Kelly, who defected from the Liberal-National government last month, and George Christensen, who remains a government member.

CMN circulated an open letter last year opposing the Victorian lockdown, with 500 signatories, yet its membership size remains undisclosed. The list of known signatories to the current CMN website statement features right-wing figures, none of whom have any significant experience treating COVID patients.

The signatories include Eamonn Mathieson, an anaesthetist who serves as one of CMN's lead representatives. He is chair of the Australian Catholic Medical Association, which advances homophobic positions. Another spokesman and "consultant for COVID-19," Ben Bornstein, is claimed to be a liaison with experts on the pandemic, yet has no publicly available credentials or non-CMN publications. Then there is Kuruvilla George, former deputy chief of psychiatry in Victoria, who sparked public opposition in 2012 due to a homophobic submission to parliament saying it was "important for the future health of our nation" to maintain discriminatory anti-gay marriage laws.

CMN is acting as a promoter of conspiracy theories and a platform for far-right and fascist figures in Australia and abroad. Apart from favourable interviews with Kelly, it has hosted individuals such as Simone

Gold and Vladimir Zelenko. Gold, an emergency medicine specialist who participated in the January 6 fascist coup in support of Trump, is a leading member of America's Frontline Doctors, which plays a similar role to CMN in the US. Zelenko is a US doctor whose fraudulent promotion of hydroxychloroquine was picked up by Trump.

In the US and Australia, as elsewhere, opposition to a scientific approach to COVID has become a central organising force for fascist forces that demand the subservience of workers to private profit interests. Determined that not one cent of society's resources be expended to protect workers, they have become a small but vocal base for promoting herd immunity.

In the US, many who took part in the January 6 coup bid have advocated fascist conspiracy theories about COVID being a hoax, and threatened violence and assassinations against doctors and public health officials, as well as state governors authorising lockdowns, such as Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer. Similarly in Australia "anti-lockdown" protests have been organised and led by such elements.

The vast majority of doctors and other medical workers oppose CMN's hostility to the safety of workers. Recognising the severity of COVID, and taking a scientific approach to its management, they have by and large courageously met their responsibilities to the public, despite the risks to their own health produced by the failure of governments to provide adequate personal protection equipment and other essential safety measures.

The presence of far-right forces, and the promotion of their dangerous claims, demonstrates that CMN is not an organisation attempting to objectively assess COVID in the interests of public safety. Rather, it is a front seeking to provide a veneer of legitimacy to the murderous policies of herd immunity advanced by the ruling corporate elite.



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