Australia: Open letter demands AHPRA end “disciplining” of Dr Berger

Richard Phillips
18 July 2022

On July 14, a group of senior doctors and medical practitioners issued a powerful open letter to Australian federal and state health ministers demanding “Free Speech for Doctors” and condemning disciplinary measures imposed on Zero-COVID activist Dr David Berger.

Berger, a respected and highly experienced remote area general practitioner, was ordered last month by the Australia Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA) to undertake a special “education program” or be deregistered over his social media criticism of governments’ response to the COVID- 19 pandemic.

Berger has been a prominent fighter against the “let it rip” policies adopted by Australian governments last December, which have resulted in millions of infections and over 8,000 deaths.

In opposition to this profit-driven program, he has advocated the scientifically-grounded measures required to eliminate transmission of the virus and protect the health and lives of the population. The attack against him comes amid a massive new COVID surge.

The letter and accompanying petition stridently denounce the blatant attempt to silence Berger and demands the immediate withdrawal of all punitive measures.

The open letter calls on the health ministers to revoke all disciplinary action against Berger, undertake an independent audit of AHPRA’s “handling of social media and public advocacy complaints” and to affirm “freedom of speech for doctors.” It also calls for a review of AHPRA’s ability to punish doctors for speaking out, its “remit as a blanket defender of government health policy,” and the removal of anonymity protections for those complaining about public advocacy.

AHPRA’s punishment of Berger, first reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, was in response to an anonymous complaint over what the authority claims are his “impolite” and “unprofessional” criticisms on social media of Australian government and health authorities’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A subsequent communication in late June, now quoted by several news outlets, claims that Berger’s criticisms of “politicians, government bodies and public health organisations, pharmaceutical companies and other medical professionals,” involve the use of “emotive and pejorative language.”

This, it continues, would lead the reader “to doubt the integrity of the persons and organisations targeted and to lose confidence in the public health pronouncements and programs promoted by them.” In other words, all public criticism of unsafe government health policies on social media by Australian health practitioners is *verboten* and anyone violating this order will be punished.

Hostile to this blatant censorship, and its anti-democratic political implications, the open letter states:

“We the undersigned concerned scientists, doctors and citizens of various diverse professional expertise, with a common interest in humanity and the reduction of suffering, disability and death caused by COVID-19, note with concern that Dr David Berger has a public condition placed upon his medical registration.”

In opposition to AHPRA’s bogus allegations, the letter describes Berger’s social media comments as “effective, scientifically valid and good faith COVID-19 advocacy in the best interests of Australian people.”

It notes his “clear, honest sustained contribution to public health through his personal and corporate advocacy and his unblemished clinical record, working in remote hardship locations, often with indigenous peoples” and warns that the disciplinary action and deregistration threats “could have a chilling effect on open political and scientific discussion.”

AHPRA’s policy, it continues, “assumes government policy is always in the best interests of the people of

© World Socialist Web Site

Australia, and that doctors must be subservient to the State over their concerns for patients. This is in breach of our ethical and moral obligations outlined in, for example, the Declaration of Geneva. Governments may formulate public health policies that are not in the best interests of the community, and dissenting doctors may take a position that is for the better interest of population health… Dr Berger is representative of all of us who take time to think, to care, and to comment in our own diverse way on how to make the public safer."

AHPRA's policy on social media, it states, "could be interpreted one way to target some doctors who do not have support of government, and another to allow other doctors who are government spokespersons to behave as they wish on social media, simply because their views accord with the administration… Australia must not be a country where reputable scientists and clinicians cannot speak for the public good because they fear reprisal from their government regulator. We stand with David Berger and specifically reject any suggestion that in a democracy we must politely agree with government policy, or stay silent."

Organised independently of the Australian Medical Association and the health sector unions, which have maintained a deafening silence, the open letter is another important affirmation that the most honest and principled doctors and medical scientists are determined to fight censorial and career-destroying threats from AHPRA and the catastrophic policies being implemented by Australian governments.

Within 18 hours of its publication the petition had won the enthusiastic response of more than 1,000 people, including from many leading figures in Australia and internationally fighting for Zero-COVID policies. Hundreds continue to add their names each day. Among them are GP's, lawyers, nurses, teachers, bus drivers and many others with passionate comments in support of Dr Berger and the role he has played in educating people to protect themselves against the virus.

Distinguished Professor Kim Prather, UC San Diego, an Aerosol expert with over 250 publications and member of the US National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering, commented:

"David Berger has tirelessly advocated based on mounds of scientific evidence that SARS2 is airborne. This has saved countless lives. He has set an exemplary example that all MDs should follow. He should be supported by the medical board. This threat is a global scandal. He should be rewarded, not silenced. He is 100% correct and history will make this clear."

Catherine Dowlan, a teacher, wrote: "I have been grateful for Dr Berger's evidence based advice on Covid safe mitigations. I apply his suggestions and so far myself & family have remained Covid free. Working as onsite teacher, I've appreciated his support, highlighting the huge challenge for schools to remain Covid safe, amidst ongoing change to & reduction of regulations on Covid safe mitigations. Further, Dr Berger's inclusiveness, recognising those especially marginalised by this pandemic, is surely crucial to overall effective management."

Dr Carol Bird said: "This isn't a matter for polite debate and respectful acceptance of others' opinions. This is a pandemic with a rapidly evolving virus that vaccines alone can't keep up with. Strident agitating against the complacency of government and its advisors is a compassionate act."

Appeals to Australian health ministers, who have actively embraced the homicidal "let it rip" program since December 2021, will no doubt fall on deaf ears. Dancing to the profit-driven demands of big business, Australian governments of every colour are determined to stop any factual discussion about who is politically responsible for this catastrophe.

The open letter is, however, a powerful weapon to educate and mobilise the working class, youth and broad layers of the population to defend Dr David Berger and prevent his silencing by health authorities.

The democratic sentiments expressed in the comments on the petition should also be highlighted and discussed with family and friends and work colleagues across all industries. Resolutions, such as the one passed by the Health Workers Rank and File Group, last Wednesday are a useful guide.

The fight to end the pandemic can only be advanced through the unity of workers with the principled scientists and medical practitioners internationally fighting for a global elimination strategy. These are the foundations of the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic being developed by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site