Teacher describes struggle to get treated for Long COVID in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a 34-year-old teacher in Auckland, New Zealand, about his experience with Long COVID and his months-long struggle to obtain a diagnosis and medical support.

The interview was conducted as part of the Global Workers' Inquest into the pandemic, which is being undertaken by the International Committee of the Fourth International to expose the negligence and outright criminality of governments around the world in allowing the coronavirus to spread.

More than 20 million people have died over the past three years from COVID-19. At the same time, the virus has left tens of millions more with debilitating long-term conditions known as Long COVID.

Tom (not his real name) teaches Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages. Originally from China, he has lived and worked in New Zealand for several years. He contracted COVID-19 in July 2022 and believes it was probably from someone at school. "I remember teaching and one of the kids was very sick, and three days later I started to develop symptoms," he said.

Schools have been central to the spread of COVID internationally, including in New Zealand. The Labour Party-led government reopened all schools last year for in-person classes after Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced an end to the country's elimination strategy.

At the start of 2022, New Zealand had recorded only 59 deaths from COVID, thanks to a relatively strict zero COVID policy. Following the reopening of schools and businesses, and the progressive removal of mask mandates and other public health measures, the country's death toll from the virus has soared to approximately 2,900.

Tom commented that "every government is letting the virus spread in the community. We are living in a civilised society, we have a lot of means to prevent COVID from spreading." Regarding Long COVID sufferers, he said, "the government wants to ignore us and sacrifice our health."

State agencies are not keeping any record of the number of people with Long COVID. With more than 2.1 million recorded infections in New Zealand, there are likely to be hundreds of thousands of people with long-term conditions due to the coronavirus. There are no specialist clinics for Long COVID and there is widespread ignorance about the condition, including among medical professionals.

Tom said he did not expect any complications when he initially contracted COVID-19 because of his healthy, energetic lifestyle. Before getting the virus, he played badminton and did high-intensity tactical training (HITT) exercises several days a week. "Every time I got the flu, I would recover in a few days, I'd never been sick for longer than one week," he said.

At first, Tom's COVID symptoms were very mild, and "after one week, I thought I had recovered. I went back to HITT." After just three minutes of exercise, his heart rate accelerated sharply. "I felt almost like I would die, I thought I had damaged my heart," he said.

"The next day I went to the emergency department and checked everything. Doctors said everything was normal. I still felt my heart was not normal." Tom went to three different cardiologists, who identified his heart palpitations and tachycardia—an irregular, rapid heartbeat above 100 beats a minute, which is a common symptom among Long COVID sufferers. The doctors "said these symptoms were not due to heart damage but they didn't know where they came from."

Later, Tom went to a neurologist and, after he began rapidly losing weight, a gut specialist. "They looked at my stomach, my guts, and said everything was normal. I thought I had a tumour, cancer or something, but there was nothing." Tom lost a total of 13 kilograms in four months.

Tom's symptoms included fatigue, constant headaches, dizziness, chest pain, heart discomfort and numbness. He would wake up frequently at night due to rapid heart palpitations and panic attacks. Periods of brain fog meant he would suddenly forget how to speak English which made it impossible to read anything.

Two general practitioners (GPs) separately told Tom he was suffering from mental health issues including anxiety

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and he was prescribed sleeping pills for his insomnia. “I told them, ‘I’m a very healthy person’ and didn’t have any mental health problems. I told them I had Long COVID, take it seriously, I’m really sick. They didn’t listen to me. They said: you’re fine, you’re healthy, you can go back to work whenever you want.

“The sleeping pills made my symptoms worse because I got addicted to them and I had vomiting, diarrhoea and headaches.” He was bed-bound for two weeks. “I lost my hope, my parents were quite worried and flew to New Zealand to support me,” he said.

Finally, after two months of worsening symptoms, a third GP diagnosed Tom with Long COVID and said he would recover with time. This doctor had just returned to New Zealand after working in the UK during the pandemic, where she had seen many Long COVID patients, including some of her colleagues.

During the worst period of his symptoms about two months ago, Tom said, “Honestly, I thought I would die. At night, my heart palpitations went to about 170 beats per minute, every night I would wake up more than three times, I got shortness of breath and diarrhoea. You can’t eat anything, you can’t think, you can’t speak properly. I told my partner about how to deal with my property and my belongings if I died.”

In the past month, Tom’s symptoms have begun to improve and he feels like he has regained “60 to 70 percent” of his pre-COVID level of health. He can sleep better and is able to go for walks, but still can’t do intense exercise.

“I don’t know why the government doesn’t do more to let people know that if you have COVID you have the possibility of getting Long COVID, and if you get Long COVID, where you can get support. In New Zealand, even medical professionals don’t know about it,” Tom said. “They need to have Long COVID clinics and specialists to support patients. I think the UK, America, Australia do. Why not New Zealand?”

“If my first two GPs had some basic knowledge about Long COVID they wouldn’t have ignored my symptoms and sent me home with sleeping pills that made my symptoms worse and made me bed-bound for two weeks.”

Until recently, Tom said, “I thought that if I recovered I would go back to China, because they had a zero tolerance policy for COVID, but unfortunately last month they reopened, and COVID has spread. The medical system in China is horrible, it’s a disaster, a lot of people have passed away. A lot of people are locking themselves at home, they don’t want to go out.

“I know a lot of my friends’ parents or grandparents have passed away during the last two months. I know of a PhD student, a friend of a friend, who passed away who was only 31 years old. He died just four days after getting COVID because of myocarditis. He was a very healthy person.”

The WSWS explained that New Zealand, China and Australia proved during the early stages of the pandemic that COVID-19 can be eliminated, saving thousands of lives and preventing mass illness. The removal of public health restrictions in all these countries, at the insistence of big business, has not only led to thousands of preventable deaths, it has also created further opportunities for the virus to evolve more infectious and vaccine-resistant variants.

Tom said: “As a Long COVID patient, I totally agree that if the world eliminated COVID it would be better, because I know I am very vulnerable to this virus.” He is very worried about being reinfected. In recent weeks, more than 40 percent of new COVID cases in New Zealand are in people who have had COVID more than once.

“I read some research saying that the more you get infected, the more likely it is that you will get Long COVID. Because COVID is a vascular illness, each time you are infected your vascular system is more vulnerable.”

Despite these concerns, Tom expects to return to teaching in the classroom when the school year begins at the end of January. “I will need to face more than 100 students per day. It’s very risky, but I have no choice, I have a mortgage to pay.

“My colleagues don’t understand Long COVID. Some of them have been infected for a second time but they don’t understand the risks. But they don’t think I’m being dramatic. They know I was a very hard working person before and so they know something happened to me.”

Tom criticised the removal of public health measures in schools, saying: “At least wearing a mask in school, protecting teachers and students, is necessary. I don’t want anyone to have the Long COVID experience like me. It’s horrible.”

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