

Australian advocate for scientifically-based COVID-safety measures dies

Richard Phillips
17 August 2023

The death from brain cancer last weekend of high profile epidemiologist and University of New South Wales emeritus professor, Mary-Louise McLaws, has seen an outpouring of heartfelt condolences from peers and former students. Hundreds of messages have been published on social media and in letters to newspapers voicing their thanks for her COVID-safety advice.

McLaws regularly appeared on Australian television and radio during the first two years of the pandemic until her retirement in January 2022, after she was diagnosed with cancer. She won popular support during this time when she and other leading medical scientists, amid mounting working-class anger, compelled Australian governments to adopt limited COVID-19 mitigation measures. She was 70 when she died.

McLaws' calls for rigorous mitigation practices and her refutations of coronavirus misinformation—"children don't get COVID," "it's just like the flu," and other lies—won her a wide following. Her concern for the health and safety of workers and the socially vulnerable endeared her to tens of thousands of ordinary people.

As one condolence letter stated, McLaws "helped to reduce the suffering, and avoid the death, of many people." Another commented: "We won't ever forget that you were there when we needed you, calmly drowning out the noise of ignorant deniers, including some who had been elected to support us through disasters and didn't."

McLaws worked for over three and a half decades on infectious disease control in Australia and internationally. She was a World Health Organisation (WHO) advisor in Hong Kong during the first SARS outbreak. When the coronavirus emerged in late 2019, she became an independent advisor to WHO's COVID-19 emergency program.

McLaws was among the first of many medical scientists who pointed out that COVID-19 was spread, not via droplets as the WHO maintained for two years, but as a

fine aerosol. This meant the virus remained in the air for longer periods and spread greater distances. She revealed how Australia's hotel quarantining of incoming travellers, sharing the same unsafe air-conditioning systems was infecting others in these buildings.

More broadly, the airborne character of COVID underscored the crucial importance of broad-based public health measures, including quality air filtration and N-95 masking. The official line of droplet transmission was aimed at presenting infection protection as a largely individual responsibility, centred around such things as limited personal distancing and handwashing, *inter alia*.

The hundreds of condolences in response to McLaws' death stand in contrast to the stony silence of Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the perfunctory comments of his health minister, Mark Butler.

Albanese has yet to acknowledge McLaws' passing, despite her being awarded an Order of Australia in June 2022 for her "distinguished service" to epidemiology, infection prevention, tertiary education and health administration.

On Monday, Butler was asked on the ABC Radio National's "Breakfast" to comment on McLaws' death. "To see her on TV outline in a very calm but authoritative and articulate way, the best way we could protect ourselves was a source of great reassurance to the Australian people... I'm sure her colleagues will miss her terribly. But most importantly, her family and friends will be desperately sad at this news over the weekend," he declared.

But it is precisely the "authoritative" scientifically grounded medical advice that McLaws advanced, which Butler's government rejects entirely.

Labor is implementing the socially criminal and anti-scientific "let it rip" policies that McLaws and other principled epidemiologists consistently warned against, leading to continuous illness and death.

According to the latest official figures, 22,466 people have been killed by COVID in Australia since 2020, 14,369 of these under the Albanese government with an estimated 300,000 people currently suffering from Long COVID.

Labor has no plans to deal with future variants of the deadly disease or any other future pandemic. Over the next two years, the Albanese Labor government will slash total federal spending on health by \$11 billion by mid-2024—primarily via the termination of COVID-19 safety measures.

McLaws' tragic cancer diagnosis and her retirement in January 2022 came just after then Prime Minister Scott Morrison's federal Liberal-National government ended mitigation measures and adopted a "let it rip" program as the highly-infectious Omicron variant began to circulate in Australia.

The "reopening" was overseen by the bipartisan "National Cabinet" and was implemented in many states and territories by Labor administrations. For the previous two years, big business and the governments themselves bridled against the successful mitigation measures that had been implemented as a result of the demands of workers and of epidemiologists like McLaws.

Since it assumed federal office in May 2022, Labor has deepened this process, abolishing even the semblance of a coordinated public health response to the ongoing pandemic.

On November 24, 2022, the then seriously ill McLaws published a final message on her Twitter account. It was an appeal for her followers to share a joint report that she and other medical scientists—R. Quentin Grafton, Long Chu, Tom Kompas and Dan Suan—submitted to an Australian parliamentary inquiry into Long COVID. The document condemned the government's shift to a "personal responsibilities model" for COVID and provided a detailed list of all the eliminated mitigation measures. It called for their immediate restoration and for increased public health funding to combat the virus and its increasingly infectious variants.

Predictably, these calls fell on profoundly deaf ears.

In a series of statements in 2021–22, the WSWS explained that there were three basic responses to the pandemic.

Firstly, the "let it rip" policy, which allowed the virus to circulate without restraint and was openly dictated by the refusal to adopt any public health measures that would impinge on corporate profits. Secondly, a mitigationist

strategy aimed at ameliorating the worst effects of the pandemic through limited public health policies. Thirdly, a scientifically-grounded elimination strategy aimed at progressively ending transmission until COVID is eliminated or eradicated from the globe.

The experiences of the past two years have seen the collapse of the mitigationist program, which had previously been implemented with success in Australia.

Now there is no middle ground. On the one side are all the governments, corporate elites and official political parties, committed to the untrammelled spread of COVID and a "forever pandemic." On the other is what is required by society and by science: a full-scale onslaught on the virus, through the necessary public health measures and the deployment of the scientific knowledge accumulated throughout the pandemic.

McClaws made a significant and imperishable contribution to the development of that knowledge. The WSWS pays tribute to her and her work.

Events themselves have demonstrated that appeals to governments and to the ruling elite will yield nothing. The fight to end the pandemic is inseparable from the struggle by the working class against capitalism and its subordination of everything to the profits of big business. It is to the working class that principled scientists and epidemiologists must turn.

The WSWS is continuing its Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, the only such inquiry aimed at educating ordinary people on the pandemic, laying bare the criminality of governments and advancing an elimination strategy. We urge all readers to follow its ongoing analysis and make contact to discuss this vital and ongoing initiative.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact