

It's time to begin rebuilding the country

As Australia begins to roll out a nationwide vaccination program, we also need to take steps toward reopening to the world.

Much of our extraordinary success in managing Covid-19 came from managing borders. Keeping case numbers down meant Australians spent the last year free of much of the tragedy and trauma that struck the rest of the world.

Now we must shift to a new footing. As our population is vaccinated in phases, we should also reopen our borders in stages. This means establishing new protocols for air travel and public health, and changing our attitudes and tolerance for risk.

Changing our risk tolerance

The original idea behind ‘flattening the curve’ of Covid-19 case numbers was to stop hospitals being overwhelmed. Over time, that morphed into not tolerating any cases of Covid-19 at all.

That was the right approach before vaccination, but it came at a huge social and economic cost that grows each passing day.

If we wait until there is zero risk of infections being brought in from overseas, it could be a long wait – indeed that day may never come. We will watch the world reopen to family reunions, tourism, trade, business meetings and international students while Australia is left behind.

However, with the vaccination being rolled out across the nation, the necessary change in approach is now possible.

Getting the staging right

The Federal Government has prioritised delivery of the vaccination in phases. We now need to tie those phases to staged reopening of the country. (The Business Council of Australia has put forward one good model for how to do this.)

With high-risk workers and vulnerable Australians being vaccinated in the initial phases currently underway, many Covid-19 restrictions are no longer required and the NSW Premier has begun reducing and removing them.

Domestic borders should also now remain open permanently. As the vaccination program rolls out to the broader adult population, international borders should begin to open –

initially to Australians returning home, skilled workers, and international students; and then, to tourists, business travellers and others.

Australia's vaccination program has gotten off to a slow start. The government said 4 million people would be vaccinated by March, on the way to completing the program by October. With less than 850,000 vaccinated in the first week of April, that did not happen.

However, we have a chance to make up for lost time now local production of the AstraZeneca vaccine has begun. As people at higher risk of serious illness from Covid-19 are vaccinated, the risk to everyone else is becoming something we should be able to tolerate.

A trusted vaccination passport

It may be the case for some time that Australia will only allow people into the country if they have been vaccinated for Covid-19, so we need a trusted and robust system of immunity certificates.

There is a debate to be had about privacy concerns, the social and technical dimensions of immunity certificates will be difficult, and it will be challenging if not impossible to get the entire world onto the same platform.

But something is better than nothing. Most likely the right way forward will be to negotiate bilateral agreements with trusted countries, while work continues on a common global platform.

We know many airlines will require proof of vaccination before letting people board planes. This will happen across the world, so Australia should engage proactively to give its citizens a way to demonstrate their vaccination status and a way to recognise this in visitors from other countries.

Changing our attitudes

After a year in hibernation, we need to shift to recovery.

For people aged between 40 and 59, the risk of dying from Covid-19 if someone catches it is 0.12%. For people under 40, it is 0.01%. With vaccination underway, we can protect older people and those with other underlying conditions, and start to move back to normality for everyone.

This will involve technical arrangements for air travel protocols and immunity certificates. But it will also require a change in the way we think about the risk from Covid-19.



We will need to shift the focus of daily reporting by government and media from positive Covid-19 test rates to the numbers of people vaccinated.

As we re-open, cases will increase from the current rate of around zero. Leaders will need to clear in their communication to the community that this is expected and manageable – likely starting this conversation before any cases arrive.

The enormous benefits for Australia from re-engaging with the world make it worth our while to move ahead into the next phase