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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, ABC News, *News Breakfast with Iskhandar Razak and Madeleine Morris*, Monday, 4 January 2021

Subject: Sydney Cricket Test, COVID restrictions in NSW and Victoria, vaccine rollout

ISKHANDAR RAZAK: Now, the head of the Australian Medical Association is urging cricket fans to watch this week's Third Test at the SCG from home.

MADELEINE MORRIS: Omar Khorshid says the New South Wales Government's go-ahead for 20,000 fans to attend without wearing masks is at odds with other measures introduced to stem ongoing Sydney outbreaks. He joins us now from Perth. Good morning to you Omar, thanks for getting up for us.

So, what are your concerns about the SCG? Because, just to put to you what the New South Wales Government says, they say that being outdoors is one of the safest places that you can be. The Deputy Premier, John Barilaro, who's currently Acting Premier, has said this morning they're going to potentially make some tweaks. What are your real concerns?

OMAR KHORSHID: Good morning. Look, the Sydney Test is an unnecessary risk to the health of the New South Wales people. We've heard over the last couple of days how there's an almost unexplainable transmission event going on in a bottle shop, where people were just there very briefly, and have managed to pick up and transmit this virus between people.

Now, if that was going on in the Sydney Cricket Ground, whether it be at the bar, or the toilet, or the turnstile, you can only imagine how many people would be exposed to the virus - whether it be because you've got a more transmissible version of the virus, like the UK strain, or whether it be because you've got a super spreader who's just- and potentially having no symptoms, just spreading the virus all over the ground.

The safe thing to do is actually to say, look, we are in a health emergency here, it's time to make decisions on the basis of health, rather than economy and sport, and all these things that we want to get back to normal. It's just the wrong decision, and we are certainly calling on the New South Wales Government to relook at this question.

MADELEINE MORRIS: So not even with masks, you would say?

OMAR KHORSHID: Masks would be more safe than what's currently being proposed. But the safest thing is actually to say, look, let's just play this game without a crowd, or with such a small crowd that there is really excellent social distancing, because we know from all over the world that keeping people apart is how we protect our community from this virus.

MADELEINE MORRIS: Can I just get your generalised view on how New South Wales and Victoria are handling these two outbreaks at the moment? We've just heard three more cases just announced in Victoria, we don't know yet whether they were people who were already in isolation, up until this point, that all of the cases in Victoria were people linked to that Thai cafe and they were all in isolation. So, the Government was sounding pretty happy about that. How do you think the respective governments are going in responding to this new emergence?

OMAR KHORSHID: So, let's start with Victoria. The Victorian Government's really reacted very quickly to this new outbreak; they've closed the border quickly and they've brought in appropriate measures to limit the chance of a new cluster emerging. Because the worry here is not necessarily just the Thai restaurant, it's actually whether there are other sites going on without anybody knowing. So, a really good response and getting some good results.

New South Wales have taken a different approach, but consistent with what they've done all the way through this pandemic, and they've shown, with runs on the board, that it can be managed. But the criticism, I guess, has been masks were a little slow to be brought in, and potentially by taking this approach, it may mean that Sydney and Greater Sydney, potentially the rest of New South Wales, is fighting the virus for longer than would've been the case if they'd taken a more rapid, short, sharp lockdown-type of approach back before Christmas.

MADELEINE MORRIS: Would you like to see the Cumberland Shire, where Berala is, would you like to see that in a localised lockdown?

OMAR KHORSHID: Look, localised lockdowns have worked in the Northern Beaches. I think that's a unique geographic place that means it really can be locked down successfully. It's much harder in suburbs, and we saw that approach fail in Victoria in the second wave. So really, it's about all of Sydney doing the right thing. And I think the mask mandate is now sending a really clear message to everybody in Greater Sydney that we all need to be doing the right thing. If people had been wearing masks going to that bottle shop, they wouldn't have been catching this virus, we think. So, you know, I think that's probably enough, and we know that the contact tracing approach has worked in the past for New South Wales.

MADELEINE MORRIS: Can I just ask you a quick question about the vaccine? Because you and your members will be on the frontline of distributing that vaccine when we do actually get it. So, the UK has now given emergency approval to two vaccines, same in India. Scott Morrison, at the end of last week, said that it would be dangerous to rush the rollout of the vaccine. Representing a group of people who will be in charge of actually putting it into people's arms, what do you make of that comment, and would you like to see it coming out any earlier?

OMAR KHORSHID: I don't think that an early rollout of the vaccine would be dangerous, but what it could do is undermine public confidence. We want Australians to know that, when the vaccine's approved, that it has been through all the processes, and we are confident, very confident, that it's safe, we know how to give it, when to give it, in which people to give it.

And we've had time also to arrange the incredible logistics - this has never been done before, this kind of vaccine rollout. And you cannot underestimate just how hard it's going to be to actually get it out into people's arms. So, we do have time to get that stuff done. We've got to complete the regulatory process, we've actually got to get access to the vaccine - that's something that no one's talking about, we haven't got the stuff in 50 million doses as yet, and we're nowhere near that. So, lots still to be done, and we're confident that the processes will lead to a successful program during 2021.

MADELEINE MORRIS: Okay. Dr Omar Khorshid of the AMA, thank you very much for speaking to us.

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