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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Sky News Live, *First Edition with Danica De Giorgio*, Tuesday, 5 January 2021

Subjects: COVID clusters in Sydney, SCG Test, new COVID variant from UK

DANICA DE GIORGIO: Well, thousands of Sydney residents are being told to isolate immediately after New South Wales Health raised its advice for a Woolworths in the city's west. Anyone who attended the Berala supermarket between 20 to 31 December must isolate until they receive a negative result.

Joining me now live is Dr Omar Khorshid, President of the Australian Medical Association. Doctor, we're talking here thousands of people over Christmas and New Year periods entering that Woolworths in particular. How concerned are you over this latest advice?

OMAR KHORSHID: Morning, Danica. The worrying thing about this Berala cluster is just how easily it seems to have been transmitted. Traditionally, you don't expect to be exposed to COVID if you're only in a shop, in particular the bottle shop next door. We know people have contracted the virus through minimal exposure, and that means that this strain could be more transmissible than the others we've seen in Australia, or you could have had a super spreader who just puts out so much virus that people can catch it with minimal exposure.

That means it's absolutely critical that anybody in Greater Sydney or anywhere within New South Wales who has the slightest symptoms of COVID should get tested, as well as of course all the people covered by this advice.

DANICA DE GIORGIO: Authorities say that it would be very difficult to lock down that particular area of Sydney - western Sydney, south western Sydney - compared to what we saw in the Northern Beaches. Is a lockdown inevitable for Greater Sydney if case numbers rise?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, it's a big if, isn't it? I think what will cause the need for a lockdown is unexplained cases popping up around Sydney or a very large outbreak. I think either of those circumstances means all of Greater Sydney would need to lock down because it is just impossible to isolate an area, unlike the Northern Beaches which has that unique geography. Localised lockdowns were tried in Victoria in their second wave, they failed, and I think it would be dangerous to think they would work in Sydney.

So really, the next few days are going to be absolutely critical. The more testing goes on, the more the contract tracers have a chance to get ahead of the virus and to avoid a substantial lockdown for Sydney.

DANICA DE GIORGIO: In terms of the New South Wales strategy, they've opted to keep business going - more of an economic and mental health strategy. Are you satisfied that this is working so far?

OMAR KHORSHID: I think you'd have to say that so far it is working. This cluster in western Sydney has got nothing to do with the Northern Beaches cluster, which now does seem to be, as far as we can tell, well under control. Sydney has a long history of living with the virus now for six months or so, and there have been a number of small outbreaks that have been gotten on top of by this testing and tracing approach from the New South Wales Government. So yes, it's a pretty reasonable approach.

However, the alternative approach of a short, sharp lockdown could have been done before Christmas for the Northern Beaches outbreak, could be done at some point now for this western Sydney outbreak if it's needed. And we've seen in South Australia that by doing that, it can be actually a very short lockdown just to give the contract tracers a chance to get ahead of the virus.

DANICA DE GIORGIO: In terms of the SCG Test, the number of people allowed at the venue is now at 25 per cent capacity. Are you still concerned about this going ahead, even with a reduced number?

OMAR KHORSHID: I'm definitely concerned, and it may be that the New South Wales Government gets away with this. But at the end of the day, they've done the right thing right throughout this pandemic in limiting social gatherings, and people over the Christmas and New Year period have really been asked to accept substantial restrictions with the aim of promoting the health of New South Wales people.

So that seems really at odds with what's going on with this cricket match. Even 10,000 people, it might be only 25 per cent capacity but it still means a lot of people congregating in areas. It's impossible to maintain full social distancing. And we've seen from this outbreak in western Sydney that it doesn't necessarily take much exposure for you to then contract the disease. So it's a risk and it's a risk that isn't necessary. And the right thing to do with the health of everyone in New South Wales and the rest of the country would be to play the Test without a crowd.

DANICA DE GIORGIO: Just finally, Doctor, in regards to the new variant from the UK. The Prime Minister is insisting that there's currently no medical advice about bolstering efforts to stop that mutant strain from reaching here. We know that there's been a few cases reported in hotel quarantine. How worried should we be about the new strain leaking out of hotel quarantine here in Australia?

OMAR KHORSHID: Actually, I think we need to be pretty worried. The reality is that our hotel quarantine has failed us on a number of occasions now in most of the States and Territories. It is not foolproof. And his new strain seems to be so much more transmissible.

This Sydney outbreak has occurred due to quarantine failure - multiple quarantine failures, not just the one. And the fact that you've got hotel quarantine workers or transport workers still contracting the virus means that if this highly infectious strain does get out of that hotel system, it could be in our community so quickly and we could lose control. So it's really critical that everything possible is done. I think the suggestions of testing people before they get on the plane are logical.

But also you've got to make sure that all the workers in hotel quarantine are properly protected with proper airborne precautions so that they are not going to be breathing in this highly infectious strain and then spreading it through our community.

DANICA DE GIORGIO: So would you like to see the advice bolstered then? Should we, Australia, look at temporarily halting flights from the UK?

OMAR KHORSHID: I think we need to make sure that our quarantine system is absolutely watertight. So there's a number of steps that haven't been taken in some States, we know that the States all got slightly different approaches. And really there should be consistency and it should be the most stringent and the safest approach is the one that's done, no matter what that costs.

I think we do need to allow people to sort of move in and out of our country, it's the right thing to do, but we've got to take every necessary step. Now, if we're not ready for this strain, then yes, you could pause arrivals for a brief period whilst we get ready. But the suggestions we've heard today of vaccinating our quarantine workers, I don't think that's practical at this stage. So really, we've still got to look at personal protective equipment and social distancing as the bedrock of protecting people from contracting the virus.

DANICA DE GIORGIO: Dr Omar Khorshid, appreciate your time. Thank you for joining me this morning.

OMAR KHORSHID: Morning, Danica.

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