**A few personal reflections on a changing 6 months of Covid**

Di asked if I would write a short article for the website about my personal experience of the effects of Covid-19, mainly because she thought we were an “international” family. At that point numbers in Australia were looking relatively good and I felt others had been much more significantly affected. However, what has struck me about this pandemic is that, once it is over, I suspect we will forget how amazingly rapidly things were changing and it will only stick in my mind because we were travelling to and from the UK as it all took off. I think my perception of the risks is coloured by having been in the UK and following events there closely.

We had arranged to fly to the UK to help out with minding grandkids while our daughter-in-law recovered from surgery. This got delayed by the NHS and Christmas and we eventually flew out in early February. The day before we transited through Singapore it was put on a “suspicious” list by the UK which meant self-isolation for two weeks if you had been there and had symptoms. Our son even rang that day to suggest transiting somewhere else instead but it was too late to change. We were asymptomatic but didn’t want to risk affecting the pending surgery date (plus a storm had cancelled our onward flight to Scotland) so we decided to semi-isolate in London and went to a couple of our daughter’s gigs (which had all been cancelled by the time we left). We gradually cut down on the number of social events we were attending. Our daughter’s partner is a GP and, at that point, was not too concerned.

We eventually made it to the Scottish destination and took on the ferrying of kids to and from school and after-school activities. Our son is an ED consultant and was on leave but going into work on occasions once we arrived. He was hearing all the horror stories out of Italy and was very concerned about undocumented spread in the community but the government, meanwhile, appeared to be doing nothing. The hospital started to be emptied of other patients in preparation for the predicted onslaught. By week two of our Scottish stay both our kids were becoming concerned that we were at high risk of catching it (in a house of three kids and two doctors) and in a high-risk group for complications if we did. In addition, we had no confidence we would necessarily make it into ICU if needed. However, being on the other side of the world from them if they got sick also seemed an unhappy option. In the UK there began to be talk about repurposing large buildings for palliative care and morgues and Twitter chat about needing more Advanced Care Plans. I think that paints the picture of the mood just then.

The week before we left, the messaging from the government included: if you get sick just stay home for seven days; only ring the advice line if you are getting worse and have trouble breathing; after seven days you can go back to work, even if you are still coughing. There was no testing available in the community. In retrospect two friends of ours (retired doctors) had both probably already had it as they described “the worst virus I’ve ever had. Couldn’t get rid of the fever and still coughing” but they had no tests.

After a family discussion about all the options we decided to bring forward our return flights by ten days. By then Brian had had a cough for a week (caught from the grandkids) but no fever or unwellness so no test advised. Reassuringly our son had a negative covid test a week later (in order to go to work after he too developed a cough). Meanwhile UK GPs were realising they had insufficient protective equipment and none was forthcoming.

The weekend we left the UK had reported ten deaths and our bit of Scotland had its first case. A month later the UK had had 15,000 deaths (many more depending on which figures you accept as these official figures did not include care homes). The rest is history as we saw it documented. Four months later they have maybe 50,000 dead, plus or minus a few thousand. We felt much safer in Australia.

While we were mid-flight the voluntary self isolation rule had come in but we intended to do that anyway after eight hours waiting around at Heathrow amidst people transiting from European holidays. At least in Singapore most were wearing masks. So we arrived in Newcastle to an almost completely empty fridge and pantry.

We arrived back to a completely different Australia and with instructions from our kids to “stay home.” We took our temperatures and crossed off the days anxiously, bearing in mind the average incubation times. I discovered in retrospect that the largest source of cases was in people returning from Europe – mainly the UK. We then started noticing colleagues suddenly having to convert their uni courses to online. I was lucky that the job I had with them involved working from home. I watched the preparation by GP practices – sourcing their own PPE and changing the way they did consults. Item numbers for telephone consultations suddenly appeared. As the number of new cases started falling after the introduction of various social distancing rules, quarantining and near lockdown we soon noticed the voices for opening up and I’m still horrified to hear “it’s only the flu and it only affects the old”. It all demonstrated how personal situations (and beliefs) rather than statistical reports and models have the greatest emotional impact on people’s reasoning or even the facts they notice.

So, my reasoning and actions are still influenced by that hectic five weeks of rapidly escalating stress levels and the feeling of impending doom that seemed to be avoided at the last minute. Being isolated is becoming a habit that is hard to break. General Practice looks like it might have changed permanently in some ways – for good or ill – so much so that I will not be returning to clinical practice even though I had left the door open. Though the numbers here are so favourable I still find the commentary about the unpredictable vascular complications worrying and am still watching closely what happens as we open up.

However, another few weeks further on and Scotland’s new cases are suddenly fewer than Victoria’s, our kids are well and my anxiety levels in that regard are significantly lower. So here we are now, on the opposite side of the world to our children and with no idea of when we will be able to travel over to see them again and varying predictions about the future of a viable vaccine. I would say my anxiety has dropped but so has my hope! What we might all be feeling three months down the track is probably completely unpredictable.

Cathy Regan