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We're not at destination yet

Easing restrictions too early risks undermining WA's progress



PAUL MURRAY

So you're driving down south for the weekend and give or take a few potential problems you've got a fair idea when you might arrive, even though you've never taken this road before.

You check the fuel gauge. Yes, we might have to stop somewhere rather than run out short of the destination.

Better safe than sorry. There might need to be a food break, too, just to keep everyone happy. But it's getting late and you really don't want to arrive after dark.

And who knows if somewhere along the way they are upholding that time-honoured Australian tradition of digging up the roads.

Sure enough, there's the big sign boasting which government is forking out the cash to build you a new highway. Like it's not your money.

Then the voice pipes up again from the back seat: "Daaaaaad, are we there yet? When are we going to get there?"

You ignore it for the first few hours. But it finally gets too much.

"For god's sake, just drink your choc milk and zip it. We'll get there when we arrive."

Sound familiar? The increasing drumbeat of those urging our governments to rush the nation back to some semblance of pre-COVID-19 normality seems to be coming from three identifiable sources.

The first are the bored backseat whingers who don't like their lifestyles being impinged. Best ignored.

The second are those who have lost jobs and face real financial hardship. These are the ones who deserve the most attention.

And the last are the economic rationalists who mount

questionable arguments seeking to dismiss the real health risks against dire predictions of future financial ruin.

Common to all three is the refrain that Australia's comparatively low death toll means the response to the virus has been over the top.

Frankly, criticising Australia's leaders for their success seems a little churlish.

There is ample evidence from overseas showing what happens when the authorities get it wrong.

It is not unexpected that successive generations of Australians who have been spared the privations of genuinely hard times would find the current

restrictions difficult.

The further we get from hardship, the less likely we are to carry the attitudes of those who endured it. Which is why we should learn the lessons of the past. As for the economic rationalists, specious arguments like those comparing speed and the road toll to choices being made to lessen the deaths from the virus are unhelpful and undermine the national effort.

The road toll has never threatened to overwhelm our hospitals and kill health workers at their posts.

This was the essential reason for the hardline approach adopted in Australia and it is a glaring omission from most of the rationalists' reasoning.

No wonder economics was dubbed "the dismal science." And it bears repeating:

criticising those who have averted potential calamity for their success is as backbiting as backseat whinging.

That aside, for the group in the middle, those suffering the financial and emotional difficulties of losing their jobs and their businesses, there has to be some hope.

The timing of the return to normality will be critical.

But going too early risks undermining what has been achieved and potentially extending the shutdown if there is a second wave of disease over winter.

I'm sure everyone in WA is happy they are not in New York at the moment watching makeshift morgues being built on formerly busy streets. Or in Wuhan in January, when people were dropping dead on the footpaths.

Or in Italy, where more than 100 doctors and nurses have selflessly given up their lives to turn back the soaring tide of infection.

So just look closer to home. Two hospitals in northern Tasmania have been shut this week after 42 staff members were caught in a coronavirus outbreak.

Tasmania was the first State to close its borders, but a lack of adherence to internal quarantine measures appears to have created clusters of disease which have plunged another 1000 people into isolation. Here in WA, where quarantining seems to have been more effective, it will obviously take some weeks of sustained low or negligible new cases before restrictions begin to be removed.

However, there is clearly some optimism coming from the McGowan Government that day may not be far away.

The financial cost of this approach is high and the economic future is daunting.

But downplaying the number of deaths that have been averted won't make that easier. And we're not there yet.



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Virus will change the way we work in open-plan offices

Open-plan offices have revolutionised the way we work.

By placing us shoulder to shoulder with others and letting us roam around the office, the open-plan theory said our creative juices would flow, we would become better at teamwork and we'd spread our ideas more freely.

The walls came down, funky furniture arrived and workers suddenly found themselves physically closer to their colleagues than they might ever have imagined.

But as we have discovered over the past two months, open-plan offices are a



double-edged sword. These open-plan set-ups don't just encourage the flow of ideas — they also stimulate the spread of a virus or disease.

And now, of course, we have been reminded that being close to others — like in an open-plan office — is not good for our health.

Some experts believe we are twice as likely to become sick in open-style working places than in more traditional offices that

feature walls and barriers.

Without walls or at least a cubicle shield, a single sneeze or cough can circulate uninterrupted and spread up to 10m.

Mounting evidence also suggests those working in open-plan offices take almost double the sick leave of those working in more traditional office designs.

The spread of an illness will be affected — or should that be infected — by the workplace culture of an organisation.

If workers are encouraged to circulate and interact rather than adopt a heads-down approach, transmission of bugs

is likely to be higher.

It is the collective of these health drawbacks that has seen workers shooed out of their office cubicle and into their home as employers attempt to put a gaping hole in the coronavirus infection curve.

COVID-19 will not directly and irreversibly destroy the concept of working in open-plan offices.

But expect that open-plan offices and the behaviours of their inhabitants will evolve.

Expect more partitions and watch out for increased use of technology across the office such as automatic doors and taps turned on by motion

sensors. Cleaning crews will turn up several times each day and there will be a zero tolerance for those who show up sick to work. And expect more and more residents of open-plan offices to increasingly work from home.

The move home will be welcomed equally by employers, who can cut office space requirements, and by workers who will be allowed to social distance at home and minimise spreading — and catching — any new disease.

Professor Gary Martin is chief executive with the Australian Institute of Management WA