

KIDS MUST GO BACK TO SCHOOL



RITA PANAHI

It was never going to end in five days. Dan Andrews revealed the worst kept secret in Victoria during Monday's press conference when he confirmed that Lockdown 5 would not end on Tuesday night.

We don't know the length or the precise details of the lockdown extension but stay-at-home orders will continue beyond the five-day "circuit breaker" we were promised last week. So much for the Premier's claim that "you only get one chance to go hard and go fast" to prevent a longer lockdown.

One change that ought to be announced on Tuesday is that the lockdown extension won't include school closures. Children have paid a heavy price for a virus that disproportionately affects the very old, very ill and morbidly obese, all of whom have had about five months to get vaccinated.

Nowhere in Australia have children paid a higher price than in Victoria with more than 24 weeks of school closures, more than twice as long as the next nearest state.

In Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory, students have had one week of school closures.

It is unconscionable to inflict further harm on young Australians in the name of Covid-19 safety given that successive studies have shown that influenza is more dangerous for children than coronavirus.

Premier Andrews said: "Schools won't be closed longer than they need to be."

They don't need to be closed now, Premier. Not if you listen to the health advice of renowned infectious disease experts instead of your catastrophist chief health officer.

Brett Sutton's hyperbole is nothing new, from his utterly false claim that I Cook Foods was the source of a serious listeria outbreak that could kill "thousands" of people, to his reports claiming that "the current climate emergency is the single greatest threat to global health into the future".

The latest research, the most comprehensive to date, shows children are at even a lower risk of Covid-19 than previously thought, with a 99.995 per cent survival rate. Scientists from University College London, and the Universities of York, Bristol and Liverpool found that the risk of illness and death for children was minuscule.

The UK has one of the world's



A small number of confirmed cases doesn't justify school lockdown.

highest Covid death rates but of the more than 152,000 deaths only 25 were under 18 and researchers have confirmed that almost all had serious underlying health issues, including life-limiting conditions and complex neuro-disabilities.

There is no justifiable reason to keep children away from school when there is so little upside and plenty of down.

Analysis of data in Sweden reveals that schools operating without masks did not cause a surge in infections and the country had similar infection levels in children as Finland, which closed schools and enforced strict restrictions.

Former Australian deputy chief medical officer Nick Coatsworth, who is also an infectious disease expert, wrote in May: "Covid-19 is not the flu. Far fewer children are affected by Covid-19, and the number of transmissions from children to children and children to adults is far less. We need to trust the evidence that says it is safe for our children to be taught at school."

The argument that "Delta is a game changer" is not borne out by the evidence. Delta is certainly more infectious but it has proven to be significantly less virulent. Premier Andrews' claims that he is locking down the state to save the hospital system are nonsensical

when one looks at the experience overseas. It's worth noting that in an average year we have more than 400,000 hospital admissions due to infections of communicable diseases; in 2018 there were about 447,000 admissions, according to government data. We don't shut schools, businesses and entire states to reduce infections and hospital admissions.

Students need to be back in school. One can easily implement measures for minimising contact between parents during school pick-ups and drop-offs and get children back in the classroom this week.

We are never getting out of this self-inflicted lunacy without a fundamental shift in mindset.

Even if we reach a vaccination rate of 70 per cent of the adult population – higher than current levels in the UK and US – we still won't be able to fully open the country unless we accept that there'll be coronavirus cases, community spread and some deaths as there are every year due to the flu. That is the reality that no politician, from the Prime Minister down, will address.

Covid zero is an unsustainable and costly fantasy. With 75 per cent of Australians over 70 vaccinated, with at least one jab, we need to move forward with a proportional response to Covid-19.

It was earlier this month that Scott Morrison along with every other state and territory leader pledged that lockdowns would be used "only as a last resort".

That national cabinet commitment, like so many others, has proved to be a big fat joke with more than 11 million Australians currently locked down in Victoria and much of NSW.

IN SHORT

Premier Andrews and Sutton appeared to contradict each other during Monday's press conference on whether Victoria was seeking to eradicate the virus. The Premier emphasised that we're not locking down to "get to zero cases" but to save the hospital system, while Sutton said: "We have to drive this variant down to zero".

RITA PANAHI IS A HERALD SUN COLUMNIST
rita.panahi@news.com.au; @RitaPanahi