Dr Ted Christie, *01 October 2021*

Disclosure Statement

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"A global pandemic is a time of tough choices. The policy decisions taken now will shape the fate of millions and define the future of nations. How to save people's lives without destroying their livelihoods? Where to allocate scarce resources? How to protect those who do not have the means to protect themselves ".

UN Department Economic and Social Affairs (2020)

From the outset, the primary goal of initial actions and measures taken by Government throughout Australia was to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by managing infection, recovery, and mortality rates based on epidemiological and public health scientific evidence within a risk analysis framework.

Public health actions and measures
introduced during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic
e.g., border closures, lockdowns, business restrictions,
social distancing, mask wearing,
sought to limit exposure
by managing population risk to ensure quarantine.

There would be little dispute that this was the appropriate response pathway to take at this time. But these restrictive actions and measures led to adverse economic, social, and cultural impacts and inequalities that ignited public controversy and protest!

Most attention by Government in the response phase has been given to resolve adverse economic impacts. This is not surprising given the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns and the closure of borders led to *"a massive negative and pervasive impact on **Australia's economic performance** in 2020"*.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a **_range of challenges for Australia_** including *"questions about the resilience of the Australian economy and its capacity to deal with future emergencies of similar or greater magnitude given the country's dependence on imported inputs"*.

However, the pandemic also increased demands on mental health services and strengthening - notwithstanding an early warning made in May 2020 by the United Nations.

Specifically, the need for the global community to do much more to protect people facing **_mental health pressures due to COVID-19:_** *"The UN noted that psychological problems such as depression and anxiety were significant causes of misery."*

In 2021, mental health issues came under far more intensive focus for their resolution in Australia. Also, many Australians **_delayed or avoided healthcare appointments and tests_** during COVID-19.

Vaccination issues
have also proved to be problematic
for the public in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mixed messages over **_who should be vaccinated with AstraZeneca_** created an information conflict that made it difficult for people who were deciding whether to get vaccinated and when to get vaccinated.

Conflict Management: Diffusion and Adoption ~ The Public Health Message and Health Literacy

"Public health messaging needs to be really clear and when it changes, it can be difficult for people to deal with and have effects that were not intended and that may be what's happened in Australia".

Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert (2021)

Where the public health message is mixed or not clear for the public, the unintended outcome may well be to ignite existing vaccine concerns or to create doubt about the vaccine - and so be a trigger for vaccine hesitancy.

But there is a way forward to facilitate better-informed decision—making by the public on vaccination: By taking a conflict management approach to avoid an information conflict.

The approach would be to recognize COVID-19 vaccination as a scientific innovation; and to then consider its rate of adoption in terms of relevant concepts for the *diffusion (or "spread") and adoption (or "uptake") of scientific innovations*.

Diffusion and adoption concepts have been an accepted body of knowledge in the social sciences for over half a century. One of the cornerstones in its framework are the *characteristics (or "attributes") of an innovation* which are relevant for its diffusion and adoption.

Some of the characteristics which may impact on the diffusion process on a scientific innovation, such as COVID-19 vaccination, include:

• *RELATIVE ADVANTAGE: Does the vaccine have a clear advantage over competing vaccines e.g.in terms of effectiveness and safety. Expert opinion suggests that relative advantage is an essential condition absolutely necessary for adoption.*

• *TRIALABILITY: The extent to which a vaccine can be tested in clinical trials before a commitment to adopt is made is a key factor determining the likelihood of it being taken up.*

• *REINVENTION: The ability to adapt, refine or modify a vaccine to suit the specific use needs of Adopters will allow it to be more easily adopted.*

• *RISK: If there is a high degree of uncertainty of outcome that the individual perceives as personally risky, it is less likely to be adopted.*

NOTE: The focus of Part 2 of this series of articles is on COVID-19 vaccination risk.

The challenge for science
is to promote better informed decision-making
by the public for COVID-19 vaccination
by communicating a clear public health message
that promotes health literacy.

TAGS: COVID-19; resilience; response; conflict; vaccine hesitancy; health literacy; vaccination; scientific innovation; diffusion; adoption; economics; mental health.