

COVID-19, children and schools: overlooked and at risk

TO THE EDITOR: We are writing to express our concern regarding the Perspective by Hyde.¹ This is twofold: firstly, the title and related content are misleading and alarmist, especially in the Australian context; secondly, the publication process and outcome falls short of what we expect of *The Medical Journal of Australia*.

Dr Hyde suggests that the risk of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in children and schools has been overlooked. This assertion is in the title, in the concluding sentence, and is implied throughout the article. This is demonstrably not true: Australian paediatricians and public health experts have actively contributed to world-leading research into COVID-19 and schools through early implementation and assessment of school-based mitigation strategies,^{2,3} surveillance, and generation of policy-relevant data. Three reports⁴⁻⁶ and a peer-reviewed publication³ have been generated from the National

Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance commissioned by New South Wales Health, showing minimal transmission, as well as a review⁷ undertaken by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute commissioned by the Victorian government. Importantly, this locally generated evidence and associated considered health and education policy guidance regarding COVID-19 acknowledge the profound and inequitable impact that school closures have on children's learning and on child and family wellbeing, a matter that Hyde gives only limited consideration. Further, we point to a recently published expert systematic review⁸ that, in contrast to Hyde's Perspective, shows compelling evidence that children are less likely than adults to acquire COVID-19 and are potentially less likely to transmit it. The corresponding editorial reinforces the importance of using an evidence-based approach.⁹

To our second concern, we question the need to publish and promote this article as a preprint in the first place, given

that the benefit of preprint databases in biomedical sciences is the early, equitable and widespread distribution of research results not opinions.¹⁰ It is possible that the *MJA*'s promotion of this Perspective has contributed to unscientific populism surrounding COVID-19, children and schools.

Parents and the wider community should be reassured that schools in Australia are being monitored closely and that educators and policy makers are extensively involved as stakeholders.

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