

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.

Philip N Britton^{1,2} 
 Archana Koirala³
 Nicholas Wood^{1,2}
 Kristine Macartney^{1,3}

1 University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW.

2 Children's Hospital at Westmead, Sydney, NSW.

3 National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, Children's Hospital at Westmead, Sydney, NSW.

philip.britton@health.nsw.gov.au

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