



# Vaccination and failing leadership

**Dr Bruce Powell** argues that we need to accept the small risks from COVID-19 vaccines and move on.

**“Minister, are vaccines safe?” It seems such a simple question and yet apparently it is impossible to answer. What is the public to make of government ministers and health officials squirming under the understandably concerned scrutiny of the anxious Australian community?**

Is AstraZeneca’s vaccine safe? What if you are over 50 – or not? Yes, no, maybe? Well, it’s definitely safer than getting COVID-19, or

riding a bike, or being stung by a bee. But no, it’s not 100% safe.

Of course, it depends on who you ask. The President of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners recently hedged her bets: “We would schedule an appointment with the patient and discuss the options ... make sure that the patient understands the risks.”

Perhaps Qantas should adopt a similar stance when taxiing to take-off?

“Good morning everybody, this is your captain. Before we take-off, I am obliged to remind you that, sometimes, plane wings snap off, engines catch fire and planes crash. We will be pausing for a moment before take-off in case anyone has changed their mind and wishes to get off.”

The point is, the pilot is highly trained, the system that governs flying is massively regulated and the whole industry is scrutinised as much as is humanly possible.

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Does that preclude tragic accidents, terrible moments of loss? No. Yet we sit in our 'extra legroom seat' because we trust the airline and its captain. We also trust the executive board that manages the planes, and we respect their advice.

The thing is, we want to fly to exotic places or embrace our loved ones. The plane satisfies that desire. The airline does not try to deny its responsibility for our safety. It does not have us sign waivers and consent forms. We all know that planes crash, and we accept that risk on a personal level. Then we sit back and wait for our gin and tonic and nibbles.

Australia's COVID-19 efforts are crying out for leadership. We are desperate to be told what to do. We need someone to tell us what time to turn up and which sleeve to roll up. We need a leader to stare into the camera and say, "All the vaccines are safe".

The tragic long-term consequences of the current debacle will further erode the public's confidence in health and its leaders. Governments must stop playing out their indecision and uncertainty behind a podium in a press conference.



Rather, they should retreat to a quiet back room, accept that uncertainty is the only certainty, and decide on a vaccination policy for the future.

The PM must accept that mistakes may happen, and tragedies may occur, but that is the nature of health.

By all means, let us appoint a charismatic medical expert on whom to rely, a personality to blame and to praise. Not a government appointee, but an independent, respected expert who is happy to acknowledge the public's fears and hesitancy.

Canberra could even plan to blame and discredit the expert, if things go awry despite all the best evidence.

Medical staff, like many other professions, are compelled to make decisions, even when the outcome is unclear. That is our burden, our challenge. It is not a minister's job to administer the vaccine or test its safety. The minister's job is to lead, pure and simple, not covet votes nor approval ratings, just lead.

Australians know that sharks swim in the ocean and that redbacks hide in their wispy webs under our cane chairs. We accept that risk as part of the privilege of living in this land.

So just tell us where and when to be for our vaccine, and we will trust you to do the rest. Then we can get back to the film, the snacks and the gin and tonic. **MF**

*ED: Dr Powell is a retired anaesthetist and former State Medical Director of DonateLife*

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