Coronavirus is no excuse for racist behaviour

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There's nothing racist about taking public health seriously.

That's the first thing to be clear on when it comes to dealing with the potentially deadly coronavirus that started in China and has now spread to seven confirmed cases in Australia.

The Chinese government's own actions put that point beyond doubt. Last week it locked down transportation links to Wuhan, the epicentre of the virus, and a city with a population more than double that of Sydney.

For a small number of Australians, a high proportion of whom will be Chinese-Australians, taking public health seriously means they'll need to submit to a 14-day quarantine period.

But here's the thing – those most at risk, such as those who've travelled to Wuhan or had direct exposure to someone with the virus, will be the first to understand that.

They'll be focused on protecting their own health and have no interest in spreading their misfortune.

Slurs and insinuations about baleful Chinese are racist tropes and need to be called out.

And as a society what we don't want to do is panic and overreact because that will help no-one.

There's been an increasing number of reports cropping up in news and social media outlets of incidents and policy measures that can't be justified by health concerns.

Stories like commuters moving places when an Australian with an Asian face sits down next to them.

The irony is, of course, that many of those wearing surgical masks on public transport these days are Chinese-Australians, not because they are infected but because they are hyper-sensitive to the risks.

Anyone who knows what's going on in China will tell you that Australians there right now, even in cities hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from Wuhan, are spending most of their time indoors and only venturing outside with their faces covered.

On Monday, NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said that while he had 'been advised that it's not medically necessary', Australian kids who had visited any part of China in the past two weeks were now being requested not to attend school for 14 days after their return.

This was because the state government was 'acting in line with community expectations to ensure the safest possible environment for our students'.

But if it's the safest possible environment for students that matters, community fears that might not be well informed aren't what counts.

By not acting on the medical facts and evidence, misinformation, rather than a virus, can get spread. And Australians of Asian ethnicity, including those with no connections to China whatsoever, end up getting hurt.

On Wednesday the federal government announced that it would seek to evacuate Australians currently stuck in Wuhan. That's the right thing to do. Yesterday a plane full of Americans landed in California. Japan took its citizens straight to Tokyo.

But if and when Australians are evacuated, they'll only be accepted on board if they agree to a mandatory 14 days in a detention centre on Christmas Island.

It's 2020, not 1820. The health system in Australia's biggest capitals is capable of providing top-notch medical care to a couple hundred people, while also preventing further outbreaks, and all at a much lower cost than on Christmas Island.

And what about the Australians who have visited Wuhan and returned home already? Will the Australian government be rounding them up, sticking them on Christmas Island too?

Virus outbreaks happen, including in Australia.

Many will remember the Hendra virus that started in Brisbane in 1994, spreading from fruit bats and horses, and which ended up killing seven people.

There's no doubt the coronavirus outbreak globally is on a much larger and more worrying scale. The medical facts might evolve in ways that justify more aggressive public health measures being taken.

But for now, no Australians have died, and there's a greater risk of fellow citizens being stigmatised at school or subject to abuse on the bus.

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