The Hon. Greg Hunt MP

Minister for Health

The Hon. Paul Fletcher MP

Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ministers

I write to suggest enhanced media reporting on Covid-19 matters during the pandemic.

I believe it possible for the mass media – television, radio, the press and electronic versions of these – to easily provide information on Covid 19 much more useful to individual Australians and to national public health.

Each State Health Department has a website on which Covid-19 ‘alerts’ can eventually be found. The alerts advise of premises etc. where Covid cases have recently been detected. They advise people who have been to such premises to variously: monitor themselves for symptoms; get tested; self-isolate etc. An example is: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/latest-news-and-updates#increased-testing-and-surveillance>. The websites also advise of current public health directions in the State, and attempt to summarise other matters which may affect people in the State, for example, border closure rules.

It should be possible for the mass media to include in each news report, or other suitable time, such information for at least the local region. For example, at the end of the daily Sydney edition of the 7.00 pm TV news, for ABC 2 to display - and for a newsreader to read-out - the NSW Department’s list of affected premises in the Sydney Metropolitan and adjacent areas, and related advice. Similarly, for the Sydney Morning Herald and Daily Telegraph to include a page reproducing the advice on the Department’s website.

Such a scheme is essentially an enhanced replica of what is done for other emergencies such as bushfires, floods and natural disasters. Its benefits would be more significant than those, not least because the pandemic is likely to last for a significant time during which there is risk of a natural weakening of the public’s response to official advice.

I am writing to the Chair of the ABC with this suggestion. However, in the event it is not soon taken up, I recommend the Commonwealth direct the ABC to perform such a public interest role and consider regulations that would require other media to take on this function for the duration of the pandemic.

Your sincerely

J Austen

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