

The World Health Network: a new framework for public health

The COVID-19 pandemic has cost over 4 million lives, left millions more suffering with persistent symptoms (Long COVID) and has devastated societies, with already disadvantaged communities being hit hardest. The tragedy is that much of this was preventable, as demonstrated early on by the Asia-Pacific countries that pursued elimination and protected both their public health and economies.^{1,2} The rest of the world can still achieve this. The World Health Network (WHN) is a coalition of citizens and experts committed to global action to protect public health through progressive elimination of COVID-19.

Elimination does not guarantee that there will never be outbreaks. The approach entails eliminating community transmission for extended periods of time. Outbreaks may occur but will be rapidly detected and controlled. Despite the manifest success of this approach, many governments have outrightly rejected it, and after repeated lockdowns and substantial losses to life and economy, they now speak of 'learning to live with the virus'. Their responses have been shaped by false dichotomies pitting public health against the economy and collective well-being against individual liberty,^{1,2} and by vested interests, rampant and organized misinformation, short-term thinking, and resistance to vital evolving knowledge including airborne transmission, the role of children and schools in transmission and the value of facemasks and ventilation. Exceptionalism, isolationism, the refusal to learn from experiences of other countries, and the failure to adopt the precautionary principle led to the same avoidable errors being repeated again and again in different countries. Even with the arrival of effective vaccines, traditionally the cornerstone of elimination, has not changed this fatalism. Rather than considering vaccines as complementary to mitigations to reduce transmission, many governments have treated these as opposing, leading to surging transmission,, which risks the evolution of new dangerous variants that threaten public health and gains made through vaccination. We are seeing a crisis of leadership in many countries which paradoxically invokes optimism due to vaccines, justifying a lack of mitigations, while speaking of the inevitability of increases in death and chronic illness that must be accepted

A global pandemic requires an effective global strategy with solidarity and collective action, at the individual, local, national, and international levels to achieve progressive elimination of COVID-19. This major change in direction will require the involvement of citizens with diverse expertise, including scientists, journalists, healthcare workers, educators, lawyers, ethicists, human rights groups, and people with lived experience of COVID-19. To meet this need, we have created the WHN an international grassroots initiative.

The WHN includes independent advisory and advocacy teams and citizens' action initiatives (appendix). Over the past year, our members have guided successful elimination efforts in multiple countries , advised governments and institutions, built accessible data analytic platforms,³ advocated for airborne precautions and school safety,⁴ produced scientific consensus documents⁵, and engaged in public communication and community-based efforts to promote individual and public health. On 14-15 July, we held the Global Summit to End Pandemics, connecting 70 cross-disciplinary and cross-country teams, and over 300 scientists and other advocates.

We aim to achieve elimination by assembling rigorous scientific evidence and guidelines; sharing experience and expertise between countries; coordinating international strategies and actions; empowering citizen actions to improve public health, vaccine uptake and shape policy; addressing the role of inequality, inequity, and marginalisation in health; campaigning for vaccine equity and sharing; and challenging misinformation, isolationism , and exceptionalism.

The WHN is a new crowdsourced framework bringing together like-minded experts and passionate advocates of public health. It is independent from any political body or government, being guided by compassion, scientific rigour, transparency, social justice, and value for life, which have been lacking in many pandemic strategies.

The challenges facing us are daunting, but we believe this movement will help us progressively eliminate COVID-19 and build more resilient and fairer systems to support the health of all, as well as tackling global challenges beyond COVID-19 including structural inequalities and climate change⁶.

We call on you to join and contribute to this global community.

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3. Baker M, Kvalsvig A, Verrall AJ, Telfar-Barnard L, Wilson N. New Zealand’s elimination strategy for the COVID-19 pandemic and what is required to make it work. *NZ Med J*. 2020 Apr 3;133(1512):10-4.
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