

Increased COVID vaccine hesitancy in Australia: what can be learned from Taiwan's recent outbreaks?

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Since December of 2019, COVID-19 has claimed the lives of over 3.47 million people and resulted in over 167 million cases globally.(1) National lockdowns and travel bans have inflicted financial hardship and psychological distress on people in unprecedented ways. Given the pandemic's severity, one might expect that people's willingness to vaccinate would be high. However, data reveals that vaccine hesitancy is still present in some pockets of the world.(2)

In countries like Australia and New Zealand, domestic transmissions have been effectively kept at bay for several months. (Fig. 1) This reflects stark epidemiological contrast to many other OECD nations.(1) However, the successful pandemic responses inadvertently caused people to become complacent, lowering their perceived risk of infection.(3) Cross-sectional surveys conducted by the Central Queensland University show that Australians' willingness to get vaccinated has remarkably declined over the year, with the exception of those living in metropolitan Victoria, where a strict lockdown was implemented in July of 2020.(3) In other words, prolonged restrictions actually improved vaccine acceptance even when the vaccine had not been authorized yet.

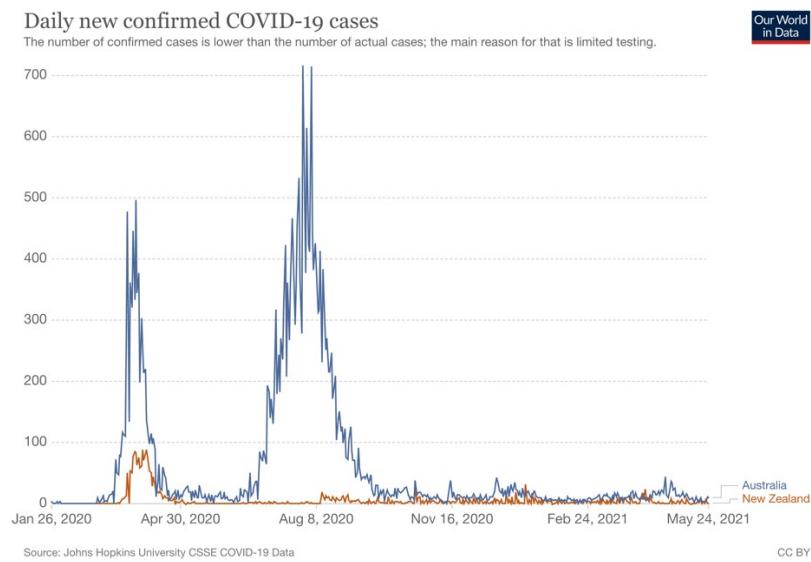


Figure 1. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases in Australia and New Zealand up to 24 May 2021.(1)

In addition to complacency, sensationalist media coverage of the AstraZeneca (AZ) vaccine has fueled Australians' fear about its safety and efficacy.(4) In particular, many eligible Australians are expressing concern over the potential risk of blood clots from AZ vaccines.(5) These adults prefer to wait and receive the Pfizer vaccine instead, a phenomenon that worries medical experts.(6) It is unquestionable that the more Australia falls behind in its vaccine rollout, the longer the nation will postpone its border reopening plan.(2)

Similar to Australia, Taiwan chose to fight the pandemic by adopting an elimination strategy from the beginning, which minimized negative health and economic impacts.(7) In 2020, the island of 23 million people impressively recorded zero domestic cases for 253 consecutive days.(1) Earlier this month, however, Taiwan witnessed a sudden and aggressive rise in local transmissions.(Fig. 2) The

country quickly entered its second highest COVID alert tier, which included the following measures: mandating mask-wearing outside of home, suspending in-person learning, limiting social gatherings and closing all non-essential businesses.(8) As of 24 May 2021, only 1% of the Taiwanese population was vaccinated.(Fig. 3) The low percentage was in part due to a delay in overseas vaccine shipment from the COVAX facility, as well as people's complacency after enjoying COVID-free lives for over a year.(9, 10)

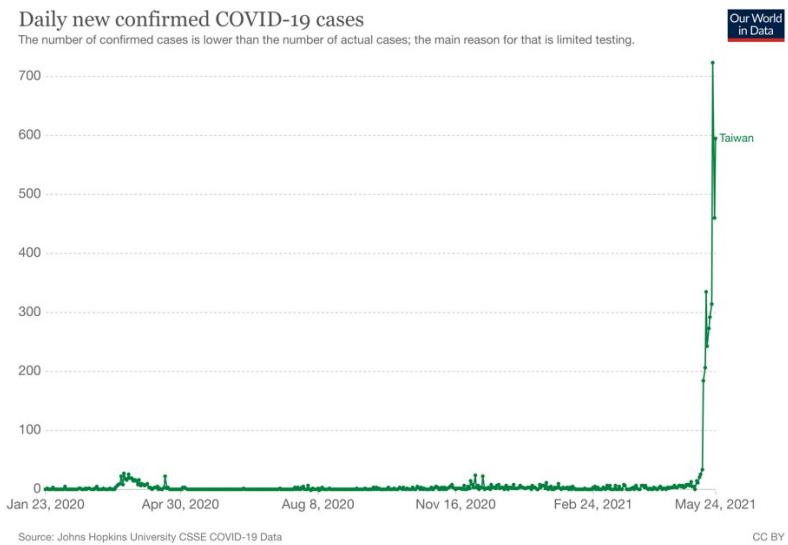


Figure 2. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases in Taiwan up to 24 May 2021.(1)

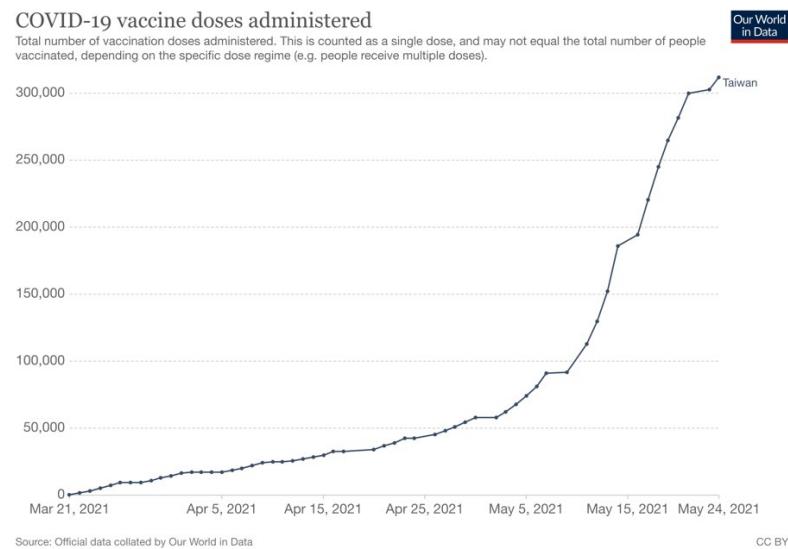


Figure 3. Data of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in Taiwan up to 24 May 2021.(11)

Taiwan's current situation garners substantial attention from global health experts. Victoria's Chief Health Officer, Brett Sutton, sees this as a grim warning for Australia. He asserts that Australians should not take "being free of COVID for granted," as it is still possible for a similar outbreak to occur in regions where not enough people have been inoculated to achieve herd immunity.(12) In conclusion, strategies to improve Australians' willingness to vaccinate are imperative. Taking notice of Taiwan, Australians should be reminded of the reality that this virus has the capacity to break through quarantine barriers at any time, in any country, regardless of past successes in combating the pandemic.

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