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Trust, truth and the rise of vaccine outrage

DYANI LEWIS

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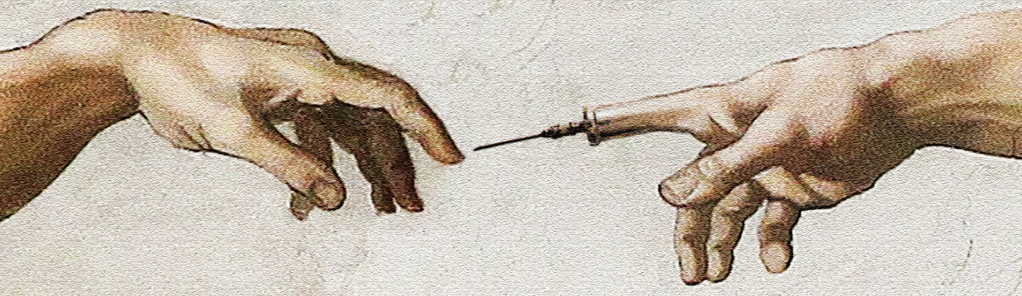

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INTRODUCTION

On 28 March 2020, the Facebook Messenger app on my phone pinged with a message from Mum. Forwarded from whoever had sent it to her, the message laid out some 'important information about the new coronavirus'. It should have been the first Saturday of school holidays for my eldest daughter, who had just started her first year of school. Instead, the term had ended early and abruptly. International travel was banned, gatherings were curtailed, and two days earlier, my home state of Victoria had recorded its first death from COVID-19. The world was on edge. I was on edge.

'The virus hates heat,' the message from Mum said, 'therefore hot drinks such as infusions, broths or simply hot water should be consumed abundantly during the day. Avoid drinking ice water or drinks with ice cubes.' It went

on: 'For those who can, sunbathe. The Sun's UV rays kill the virus and the vitamin D is good for you.' According to the poorly punctuated, copy-pasted screed, the advice was originally sent as an internal email to staff at the Royal Brisbane Hospital. 'Please share with family, friends and work colleagues,' it implored. My mother diligently forwarded a second, abridged version of the same message, a moment after the first. It claimed to be 'SERIOUSLY EXCELLENT ADVICE by Japanese doctors treating COVID-19 patients'. It was obvious that neither claim was true and, to me at least, that the advice was nonsense.

'Unfortunately this is total BS,' I replied. 'Happy to talk – have spent last few days talking to experts on transmission.' Hot water won't stop the virus, I told her. Washing your hands is a good idea, I said. And facemasks make a difference, I added, even though not everyone was convinced of that at the time.

A couple of days later, Mum sent links to sewing patterns for facemasks, no doubt discovered on the same platform she'd found the other dubious messages. But a month after that, she sent me a video on YouTube. 'Have a look at this – really interesting!' she texted. The video was a webinar by Andrew Kaufman, a psychiatrist based in Syracuse, New York state. After reeling off his credentials, Kaufman laid out his thoughts on 'What I think COVID-19 really is'. Instead of being caused by a novel virus, Kaufman speculated, COVID-19 was probably caused by some other form of cellular assault – stress, perhaps, or a toxin – which was

causing microscopic vesicles with a virus-like appearance under the microscope to form inside a person's lung tissue. Or maybe – though he couldn't find anything in the literature to support his theory – electromagnetic radiation from 5G mobile phone towers was the culprit. And those first cases of COVID-19 in the Wuhan wet market? Probably just a case of bad seafood, he said.

I called Mum straightaway. The doctor – who has since disavowed mainstream medicine – doesn't know what he's talking about, I said. I was terse as I invoked conspiracy theories and the stupidity of people to believe such garbage. Mum bristled and became defensive at my tone. 'OK, well I don't know. That's why I'm asking,' she said. I wonder whether even then, she was deciding to be more careful about what she shared with me.

Despite reporting on little else, I barely spoke of the pandemic with my mum over the next year or more. My world contracted around me. Lockdowns, home-schooling, and interviews about contact tracing, facemasks and specks of contagion carried on air currents dominated my days. But my mum's life away from Melbourne proceeded relatively untouched by COVID-19, which is not to say she wasn't dealing with other upheavals. A few months before the pandemic arrived on Australia's doorstep, she sold her house in the leafy hills of Melbourne's outskirts and temporarily moved in with her sister in Adelaide. Then, at the end of 2020 – having spent all of five days in lockdown – she moved again, this time to Canberra, to be closer to my brother and

his kids, and to start afresh. Two weeks before Christmas 2020, they signed a lease together.

In August 2021, Canberra was on the precipice of its first lockdown when my brother texted me. 'So I'm kind of worried about [Mum]. She's gone [off] the deep end with covid conspiracies,' he wrote. 'Anti lock down, anti vaccine … all the right-wing loopy stuff from the states,' he wrote. His main concern was for his kids – aged eleven and nine at the time – who were being fed a diet of fearful warnings from their grandmother. Microsoft founder Bill Gates is bankrolling vaccine development, she told them, and they're not really vaccines at all, because they alter your DNA.

Her messages at the start of the pandemic suggested she had already tapped into some questionable networks online. But I'd ignored those crimson-bright warning signs. YouTube and Facebook algorithms – combined with her own tendencies to mistrust Western medicine and government authorities – had taken her to the darker corners of pandemic denial and conspiracy.

I was aghast and outraged on my brother's behalf. But I wasn't surprised. For as long as I can remember, my mum has held unconventional views. Mine was a homebirth. On a frosty Canberra morning, I slid into the world in the bedroom of a suburban weatherboard, midwife in attendance, oxygen tank at the ready. I received no childhood vaccines until I attended high school, and I was wholly unfamiliar with the idea of a family doctor. Mum was an acupuncturist and Chinese herbalist long before she

qualified as a psychologist. And on repeated occasions she has demonstrated what I eventually saw as her credulous side – buying into cult-like religious groups and get-rich-quick schemes that inevitably failed or, more often than not, left her worse off than before.

I'd rarely challenged my mother on her beliefs. Perhaps out of cowardice, perhaps because of a sense that such efforts would be futile. Sometimes there were disquieting kernels of 'truthiness' in what she said; other times it was pure bunk. Either way, I'd had no interest in disabusing her of her passionately held sense that she'd discovered something of genuine importance.

A week later, my brother contacted me again. Mum had sent him a link to a YouTube video, 'MASS PSYCHOSIS – How an Entire Population Becomes MENTALLY ILL', which cunningly portrays the COVID-19 pandemic as an episode of propaganda-induced society-wide madness, à la the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials in Massachusetts, without ever mentioning the pandemic specifically. My brother tried to tell Mum that the science about the pandemic was conclusive. 'Bullshit,' she replied. 'It's not really about the science but what is being allowed to be reported.'

I shouldn't have taken it personally, but this hit a nerve. For eighteen months, COVID-19 had consumed my life both personally and professionally. And now my own mother was questioning the veracity of my work, not to mention my mental grasp on reality. I was incensed that she was painting

me, a member of the media, as a dupe, wilfully doing the bidding of a power-hungry government, or worse, the money-grubbing corporations that make up 'Big Pharma'.

I called her, told her we were concerned. But there was little concern in my voice as I berated her for getting all her information from Facebook and YouTube. She started telling me about how fear-mongering propaganda can cause mass, population-wide psychosis. Then she turned to defending herself against my attack. Eventually, she just hung up.

In the weeks that followed, she launched a campaign to convince me that truth was on her side, that I was the one who was mistaken. With the vaccine rollout now in full swing around the country, she was determined to persuade me that the vaccines were dangerous. She'd send a video link. I'd reply with another link to debunk the video's content or expose the liars in the video who were peddling mistruths. 'If you believe in smear campaigns without knowing both sides that's fine. Can't believe you are so gullible,' she wrote. 'This is a repeat of the things that happened in Nazi Germany. The propaganda is unreal. But then telling you that is pointless so just forget it. No need to reply.'

As countries struggled to staunch the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, progress during that first pandemic year towards an effective vaccine was nothing short of extraordinary. 'A freaking miracle' is how health journalist Helen Branswell described it on the health news site *STAT* in February 2022. Just sixty-three days after the sequence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was published, scientists were

already injecting doses of Moderna's Spikevax into the arms of volunteers. That was on 16 March 2020, four days before Australia closed its international borders to non-citizens and non-residents arriving from overseas and the day Australia diagnosed its 401st case of COVID-19.

The speed of vaccine development outstripped all expectations. In February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) predicted that vaccine development would take at least eighteen months. Instead, it took less than a year. On 2 December, the United Kingdom became the first country in the world to authorise a COVID-19 vaccine when its Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) gave temporary regulatory approval for Comirnaty, the mRNA vaccine developed by German biotechnology company BioNTech and Pfizer, the American pharmaceutical behemoth.

The previous record-holder for vaccine development was Mumpsvax, developed by the prolific vaccinologist Maurice Hilleman, who worked for the American-owned Merck & Co. From the time Hilleman swabbed the throat of his sick daughter Jeryl Lynn in 1963 to collect a sample of the mumps virus, until the vaccine was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, just four years elapsed.

Scientific triumph has come with a sting in its tail. Segments of the public have been alarmed by the speed of vaccine discovery and the novel technologies in the most widely injected vaccines available. An undercurrent of mistrust in the multinational pharmaceutical companies who

developed the vaccines and the government agencies that fast-tracked their approval has fanned scepticism of the vaccines and the motives of those promoting them. The close ties between pharmaceutical companies, governments and scientific advisers have more than a whiff of impropriety about them. The upshot: people who have never before refused vaccines have now became staunch opponents to the COVID-19 jabs.

I'm far from alone in having a significant personal relationship catastrophically rupture over questions of how the pandemic has been managed, and over the COVID-19 vaccines in particular. Ask anyone, and they will tell you of a person in their orbit – a family friend, a brother-in-law, a colleague at work – who has chosen not to be vaccinated, lost their job because of vaccine mandates, or joined one of the many 'freedom' rallies to decry restrictions that have been placed on the unvaxxed.

Despite their seeming ubiquity, all the experts I spoke to for this book (psychologists, social scientists, epidemiologists and others) told me that *true* anti-vaxxers – not the fearful, or the hesitant, or the time-poor, or the complacent, but the people who would stake their reputations and livelihoods on refusing to be vaccinated – are actually rare. By the end of summer 2021/22, upwards of 90 per cent of eligible Australians had been vaccinated against COVID-19, many of them having received three doses of one COVID vaccine, or of a mix of different COVID vaccines. People like my mother, who refuse to get vaccinated for ideological reasons

and other deeply held beliefs, are a tiny – albeit incredibly vocal – minority here in Australia.

One problem, according to the experts I spoke to, is that these anti-vaxxers can persuade others, infecting the hesitant or anxious fence-sitters with the mistruths they cling to. Another is that they have become a lightning rod for activist groups with right-wing political ambitions and a desire to create chaos. The groups have coalesced into an angry mob whose separate origins and motivations have become hard to distinguish. Massive days- or weeks-long protests have taken place in Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Austria and New Zealand (to name a few), and, of course, here in Australia.

In February 2022, the Canberra Convoy, as it became known, drew an estimated 10,000 protesters to the nation's capital to protest vaccine mandates and other restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Emboldened by their sudden prominence on the world stage, militant anti-vaccine activists and their right-wing 'freedom fighter' allies have openly threatened violence on politicians and others. More protests are planned.

Online disinformation has also spilled over into personal attacks. In January, a Facebook user posted what was purported to be an eyewitness account falsely claiming that two girls at a Gold Coast medical clinic suffered violent convulsions and later died in the waiting room after receiving COVID-19 vaccinations. The post sparked panic and led to death threats against the doctor and clinic staff. The vicious

reaction forced the clinic to pull out of the vaccine rollout to children aged five to eleven years, just three weeks after it began.

The COVID-19 vaccines – once billed as our ticket to freedom from lockdowns and masking and restrictions on visiting family and friends interstate and abroad – have instead turned out to be a spark that has fanned spot fires of discontent into nationwide protest movements. The daily barrage of headlines – about protests and court cases and unvaccinated sports stars – has continued unabated since vaccination against COVID-19 became freely available to most adults midway through 2021. Moral outrage flared on both sides, fuelling further coverage and commentary in the mainstream media.

When I spoke to Julie Leask, a social scientist who is the go-to expert on vaccine refusal, I asked her about the best way to combat anti-vaccine activists. Her advice: don't give them oxygen. 'Our perception of what others are doing affects what we think is a norm, and social norms affect vaccination,' she told me.

I've wrestled with this conundrum throughout my research and reporting for this book. By describing the reasons people have for refusing to be vaccinated, am I legitimising their position, lending weight to their arguments or, worse, drawing recruits to their cause? That is, of course, not my aim.

There are good reasons not to shy away from what is a complex and thorny issue. Vaccine coverage – though

high – is far from uniform. For some, disadvantage and lack of access to vaccination services remain barriers. As a society – a wealthy one at that – we should all be concerned that this is the case. But we also need to take an unflinching look at why people who could access vaccines if they wanted to are instead refusing them, despite overwhelming support for vaccines from all corners of the scientific community and regulatory machinery.

In the first chapter, I try to make sense of who makes up the few per cent of people who haven't been vaccinated. Are they scared, complacent, stubbornly refusing vaccination? Or are they anti-vaxxers, actively promoting misinformation to recruit people into their fold?

The great unvaxxed are painted as selfish free-riders, relying on the goodwill and compliance of the rest of the community so that they can shirk their communal responsibilities. But what are their motivations for refusing vaccination? Chapter 2 examines the attitudes, personality traits and psychological roots of anti-vaccination sentiment.

The third chapter investigates the damage that is done with misinformation, which spreads rapidly through social media channels and private messaging apps. Rumours, inuendo and deliberate lies undermine public health programs and provoke anxiety in a public already unsettled by the uncertainties the pandemic has foisted upon them.

Some of the most successful creators and disseminators of anti-vax misinformation are scientists and medical practitioners. These bad actors use their professional clout and

qualifications to bolster their credibility. Chapter 4 takes a look at some of the leading promulgators of anti-vaccination material and their outsized influence.

In chapter 5, I speak with people who have become ardent opposers of the coronavirus vaccines. Like my mother, they all have fingers in the complementary and alternative medicine or wellness industries. As these conversations reveal, shunning vaccination is a thread that runs deep in communities that also shun other forms of Western medicine.

Vaccine mandates are the spark that has ignited much of the outrage over COVID-19 vaccination. In chapter 6, I put vaccine mandates under the spotlight. Our response to people who are reluctant or unwilling to be vaccinated must be proportional to the threat that they pose. I ask whether vaccine mandates are the right tool to wield against this threat. It's a question that is particularly pertinent given the shifting landscape of the pandemic. Mandates enacted during the surge of the Delta variant in mid-2021 are being questioned – and in some instances abandoned – since the milder, more infectious and vaccine-dodging Omicron variant arrived on the scene.

In the US, vaccination rates – along with COVID-19 case numbers and deaths – can be overlaid onto maps of political affiliation. The Republican–Democrat right–left divide that is so stark in the US hasn't been replicated here, but anti-vaccine sentiment rubs up against libertarian and right-wing political ideologies as protests over vaccine mandates bring disparate groups together. This is the topic of chapter 7.

Crystal-ball gazing is always a fraught affair, an invitation to be proven wrong. Nevertheless, the final chapter deals with how the pandemic – and vaccination – could play out from here, given what we know from the cresting and falling waves of infection that we've already seen.

The rift between my mother and me added to a sense that, in 2021, the pandemic took a turn from being a destructive and discombobulating force to being a truly divisive phenomenon. My hope is that close consideration of the unvaxxed pockets in our community – including their entanglement with free speech movements and questions of trust in government and the media – will help us to address this canary in the mine of broader societal discontent and disconnect. Out-of-hand dismissal of those who feel threatened by vaccine mandates, or who claim that their freedoms are being infringed, blinds us to the reasons that the anti-vaccine movement has become so prominent and ignores the serious consequences that might flow. A greater understanding of those at the fringe of our community will, I hope, illuminate ways that trust can be re-established and extreme outcomes – on a personal or societal level – can be avoided.

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