

divisive conversations on race and COVID-19 damage public health efforts

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Nicole Bartholomeusz, CE, cohealth

The recent media storm blaming culturally-diverse communities for COVID clusters must be called out for what it is – racism. Laying blame at the feet of people who are already highly-marginalised is especially damaging at a time when we need to be engaging all people to comply with testing and lockdown measures.

As a community health service that provides low-cost and free healthcare to vulnerable people, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, we see first-hand the damage that such messaging does to the communities we support. We stand with them - and for them – in the face of the blatant racism of recent days and week.

One of the women we work with, Aamina* who is originally from South Sudan, told us that she is angry and upset that she and others in her community, are being painted as “dumb”, “unable to follow instructions” and “careless”.

The systemic issues contributing to the ‘second wave’ run deeper into social and economic disadvantage, and structural racism. Many people from migrant backgrounds are in low-paid, casual jobs – often essential jobs in healthcare, transportation and food supply – jobs which have no capacity for self-isolation.

People from migrant backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers, are more likely to be living on a low-income, have insecure or poor quality housing, and less access to healthcare. These are conditions not of their choosing, but have an enormous impact on their health.

Entrenched racism and discrimination has been long recognised as having a significant impact on health. A report released by the Victorian Government in 2017 revealed that the association between racism and physical ill-health was as strong as the association between smoking and ill-health.

The racist dialogue currently consuming the media is a backward step in our public health efforts. To overcome this pandemic, our responsibility is to we must ensure that our public health messages are understandable by everyone in the community. While it is everyone’s responsibility to comply with public health advice and directions, the focus must be on providing relevant health information through the right channels.

People need to feel informed, respected and empowered to care for themselves and their communities. Playing the blame-game only disenfranchises people and makes it harder to engage them in healthcare systems.

COVID-19 does not discriminate based on ethnicity or the colour of people’s skin; we are facing a global pandemic and no country, city or suburb is immune. It is time we put aside divisive conversations about race and ethnicity, and focussed on the job of overcoming a health pandemic that has killed half a million people globally and rising.