Submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel

Dr Michael Baron

CEO, Baron Consulting

Dear Members of the COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel.

Thank you very much for initiating the investigation into the COVID-19 Response as well as for providing this opportunity for myself and others to contribute to work of the Panel.

1. *Introduction (Scope of the Submission)*

In recent years, I have been involved in a number of [Digital Transformation/Data Analytics Projects](#). Therefore, since this is my knowledge domain - in my submission to the panel, I am going to focus exclusively on the Data Management & Analytics practices that have been taking place. As I am no expert on healthcare, I will refrain from looking beyond the Data Management/Analytics Issues and into medical sides of the COVID-19 response discrepancies that have been occurring, so paradigm of my submission does not shift from issues that I can fully appreciate and contribute in improving towards the ones where I may have some emotion-fuelled views but purely speculative perception of the operational environment and the processes.

Furthermore, in the Year 2020 – I have already submitted my views on the Victorian Government's Inquiry into COVID-19 Contact Tracing System and Testing Regime where I focused on technology implementation & data analytics challenges at the State (aka Victorian) level. In this submission I would like to take an opportunity to share my observations on the modus operandi at the National level and attempt to pinpoint areas where national (as opposed to state/territory state ones) level responses to the COVID-19 could have been improved – particularly with activities that can be instrumental for building our resilience if faced with further pandemics in near or even not so near future.

2. *Understanding Analytical Challenges of the Pandemic Resilience*

When justifying rationale behind the Governments' response to the Pandemic, a number of seemingly logical reasons has been given. In this section, the author aims to explain what the analytical struggles have been all about as well as how the response landscape could have been improved back then and should be improved for the sake of Australia doing a better job should another pandemic happen.

The 2 main arguments (and these arguments often tend to come hand-in-hand) "in defence" of the governments dubious-looking response have been:

- *COVID-19 happened "out of the blue" so we were caught by surprise. It was an extraordinary situation that we could not plan for*
- *When COVID-19 did occur – every effort was made to protect the people by reaching out to those affected with offers of assistance and attempting to reduce the spread. This is all that that the Australian Government could possibly be doing under such difficult and extraordinary conditions.*

Below are the more in-depth explanations of those so-called excuses as well as some suggestions how the pandemic response landscape (as well as our resilience to pandemics at large) could be improved.

2.1 *The "Known Unknowns" – Are We in a Position to be Prepared for a Pandemic if We Do Not Know When It Is Coming, What Kind of Pandemic It is Going to Be & Even Whether It Is Coming or Not?*

One of the core arguments behind justifying our rather miserable response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been built around impossibility of predicting disastrous events of such grand-scale. There were arguably no ways of knowing "it was going to happen" and consequently – difficult to plan for. When looking at the Australian Budget it is hard to find a section that looks specifically at building up resilience to the "known unknowns". Nor the concept of known unknowns tends to be incorporated into the predictive analytical activities currently undertaken by the Government Agencies responsible for planning and development to a sufficient extent (as I do not know for sure, I am more than happy to be proved wrong on this one). But then again – shall we simply surrender to the fact that this and further Pandemic are "impossible to predict"?

The postulate discussed in the passage above may sound convincing at first sight but is no reason why governments can not be well-prepared for pandemic waves and in a position to have well-crafted agile responses under their sleeves. Contemporary Predictive Analytics forecasting techniques can comfortably (e.g. by Using Unsupervised Machine Learning Methods & Models) consider not one, not two…but a wide range of scenarios that a pandemic-to-come may evolve by. We **DO NOT** need to know when it is going to happen, what exactly the impact (e.g., how contagious, mortality and health impact rates etc.) is going to be & and even origins and exact pathways of the viruses in order to start preparing response roadmaps. The very fact that it may happen should be a reason good enough to get engaged in predictive response modelling and this (to the best of my knowledge) **WAS NOT DONE**!

2.2 *Reactive COVID-19 Responses: Can they be Effective?*

Without getting engaged into discussion of effectiveness and socio-economic sustainability of the responses (e.g. lockdown & curfews) it is hard to argue that government agencies were not trying dramatic measures to contain the COVID-19 spread. However, it often appeared the responses were at least one step behind the newly unfolding challenges. This where predictive analytics could also

assist (and should be assisting in future) with modelling of the courses of action that are likely to become essential to be undertake. Even some of the concrete blunders were not entirely surprising. For example the hotel quarantine breaches happened predominantly as results of tragic blunders of those responsible for managing the quarantines. But how unexpected were those blunders. Was there ever a realistic chance to any densely populated parts of Australia COVID free? True, we can sometimes pinpoint specific actions that have led to the quarantine breaches, insufficient testing, lack of medical resources etc. But it is quite transparent that if not for those actions...some other mistakes would have been made! COVID-19 did have to spread across all states, impact the elderly more, disrupt economic activities...and the list can go on and on.

In order to mitigate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic better, It was essential to appreciate difficulty of the challenges realistically and accept that errors will be made and that the focus should be on early planning and forecasting of the scenarios where we are managing "society with COVID" rather than staying COVID-free! This would allow for better Predictive Analytics and consequently, in earlier and more accurate planning.

3. Building-up the Pandemic Resilience (Summary of Recommendations)

As this submission is to be limited to 3 pages only, only the condensed version of the recommendations (key points) can be included.

In a nutshell, the Australian Government needs to focus on developing Covid/Pandemic Predictive Analytics Programs further by the means of:

- Accepting the "known unknowns" concept and planning for events that may be difficult to define accurately, yet can be predicted and planned for "in case" they do take place
- Proactive as opposed to Reactive planning for Covid Response programs as well as response programs for other potential Pandemics.
- Once disrupted by COVID, the traditional environment tends to be hard to restore so covid response planning should be focusing on Building Better rather than Rebuilding