

Epidemiology, it's going viral!

The challenge

In 2019, few Australians would have been able to describe what an epidemiologist does. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, epidemiology is now far better understood, and many Australian epidemiologists have become household names, including the Institute for Health Transformation (IHT)'s Alfred Deakin Professor Catherine Bennett.

Catherine is a leading researcher and teacher in public health, with an interest in infectious disease epidemiology.

Our response

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a need for articulate, informative and engaging science communication became apparent. Catherine swiftly filled this need, penning her first COVID-19-related article in The Guardian in February 2020. By June 2020, Catherine was providing up to 50 media interviews per week.

Catherine partnered with Barwon Health to profile asymptomatic COVID-19 cases and examine socioeconomic determinants of disease transmission. She has also partnered with organisations in more than 50 countries to examine excess deaths, impacts of lockdown on culturally and linguistically diverse communities, infection control in hospitals, and rehabilitation support for people living with Long COVID.

IHT featured Catherine in its podcast, [Healing Health](#) and [website](#). While Deakin University created a [dedicated blog](#) to promote Catherine's work on COVID-19.



The results

Catherine has contributed to more than 20,000 COVID-19-related media items in Australia since the beginning of the pandemic, and many more internationally, including the BBC, CNET, CNN, Bloomberg, Reuters and Al Jazeera.

She has worked with data journalists from [ABC News](#) and [The Age](#) to visually explain outbreak dynamics and the [impact of control measures](#), affording her title of 'voice of calm' as people could see a possible end in sight and understand the significance of authorities speaking of 'flattening the curve'.

Catherine has also been a strong contributor to governmental reviews that will shape the legacies of this pandemic. She has provided expert advice to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiries into Contact Tracing and Hospitality and Tourism, the Senate Select Committee on Job Security, the All Party Parliamentary Group in the UK and scientific advisory committees (AstraZeneca COVID Vaccine, ResApp Health, Impact Biotech Healthcare).

The impact

Catherine's calls for new approaches to contact tracing were adopted by the Victorian Government in early October 2020 and recognised by the Premier of Victoria as the [pathway out of lockdown](#). She also led the call for daily testing of hotel quarantine workers, which was adopted nationally.

Reflecting on her work, Catherine says her focus is always evidence and clarity.

'The level of [respect from the media](#) has enabled me to explain current developments and influence the way topics were covered and the tone and emphasis of that coverage to ensure balance was maintained,' she says.

'But perhaps the best measure of depth of impact is in the more personal and detailed correspondence I receive from individuals; personal stories of people impacted by lockdown, separated from family, worried by the alarming messaging from media and authorities.

'I have pulled epidemiology from behind the computer to front of stage. Epidemiology is not just helping people through the pandemic, it is going viral!'



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