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The World Health Network: A global citizens' initiative for public health

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The COVID-19 pandemic has cost over 4 million lives, left millions more suffering with persistent symptoms (Long COVID) and has devastated societies, with already disadvantaged communities being hit hardest. The tragedy is that much of this harm was preventable, as demonstrated early on by many Asia-Pacific countries that pursued elimination and protected both their public health and economies.¹⁻³ The rest of the world can still achieve this. The World Health Network (WHN) is a coalition of citizens and experts committed to global action to protect public health through progressive elimination of COVID-19.

Elimination means bringing cases down to sufficiently low levels where there is no community transmission for extended periods of time. Outbreaks may occur but will be rapidly detected and

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controlled. Despite the manifest success of this approach, many governments rejected it outright, and after repeated lockdowns and substantial losses to life and economy, they now speak of 'learning to live with the virus'. Many government's responses have been shaped by false dichotomies pitting public health against the economy and collective well-being against individual liberty.¹⁻³ Effective responses have been hampered by vested interests, rampant and organised misinformation, short-term thinking, and resistance to vital knowledge including airborne transmission, the role of children and schools in transmission and the value of facemasks and ventilation. Exceptionalism, the refusal to learn from experiences of other countries, and the failure to adopt the precautionary principle led to the same avoidable errors being repeated again and again in different countries. Even the arrival of effective vaccines, traditionally the cornerstone of elimination, has not changed this and the reliance on vaccination alone as the main strategy without controlling transmission risks the emergence of more dangerous escape variants.⁴

A global pandemic requires an effective global strategy with solidarity and collective action, at the individual, local, national, and international levels to achieve progressive elimination of COVID-19. This major change in direction will require the involvement of citizens with diverse expertise, including scientists, journalists, healthcare workers, educators, lawyers, ethicists, human rights groups, and people with lived experience of COVID-19. To meet this need, we have created the WHN an international grassroots initiative.

The WHN includes independent advisory and advocacy teams and citizens' action initiatives (appendix). Over the past year, our members have guided successful elimination efforts in multiple countries⁵, advised governments and institutions, built accessible data analytic platforms,⁶ advocated for airborne precautions and school safety,⁷ produced scientific consensus documents⁸, and engaged in public communication and community-based efforts to promote individual and public health. On 14-15 July, we held the Global Summit to End Pandemics, connecting 70 cross-disciplinary and cross-country teams, and over 300 scientists and other advocates.

We aim to achieve elimination by assembling rigorous scientific evidence and guidelines; sharing experience and expertise between countries; coordinating international strategies and actions; empowering citizen actions to improve public health, support vaccine uptake, and shape policy; addressing the role of inequality, inequity, and marginalisation in health; campaigning for vaccine equity and sharing; and challenging misinformation, nationalism, and exceptionalism.

The WHN is a citizens' initiative, bringing together like-minded experts and passionate advocates of public health. It is independent from any political body or government, being guided by compassion, scientific rigour, transparency, social justice, and value for life, which have been lacking in many pandemic strategies.

The challenges facing us are daunting, but we believe this movement will help us progressively eliminate COVID-19 and build more resilient and fairer systems to support the health of all, as well as tackling global challenges beyond COVID-19 including structural inequalities and climate change⁹.

We call on you to join us and contribute to this global community.

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