**A Month with the Coronavirus**

By Jill Fenwick

7 March: I began my diary of the coronavirus. Dr Chris Higgins returned from a visit to the United States. He had a slight cold. Following a weekend at home, he went as usual to his practice at the Malvern Clinic and over the next few days saw 72 patients, before discovering that he had Covid-19. In a press briefing, Health Minister Jenny Mikakos stated that, while doctors were dedicated, it was irresponsible for people to be going to work if they were unwell.

In response, schools began to close down: the first was Carey Grammar where a teacher tested positive to the virus, followed by St. Kevin’s, Loreto Mandeville Hall and Lauriston Girls’ School. In the next few days Melbourne Girls’ Grammar and St Leonard’s College followed suit. Public schools remained open.

10 March: As the size of the problem became apparent the Melbourne community reacted with panic. Toilet paper, paper towels and baby wipes were bought in bulk and supermarkets struggled to maintain supplies. Then panic buying extended to sugar, flour, cereal and frozen goods.

By 18 March Victoria had 142 cases of Covid-19 and panic was spreading. Letters to *The Age* complained about busloads of people coming to ‘loot’ country supermarkets.

One resident wrote: *I live in a small country town of 400 people. I am disgusted, ashamed, horrified and appalled by the behaviour of people from Melbourne coming up here and cleaning out the supermarkets of essential supplies.*

*They are not here to visit the town and support those who work in the cafes and shops. I am not blaming all Melburnians, but this mass panic buying reeks of greed, looking after themselves and not their fellow humans.*

19 March: the 2020 AFL season began with a Richmond v Carlton match where there were no spectators.

20 March: The national tally was 900 people infected nationwide; in Victoria there were 126 cases.

21 March: 229 Coronavirus cases in Victoria. Cafes and restaurants lost customers.The Nova Cinema, which had struggled to stay open, shut down.

23 March; 500 police were deployed to enforce social isolation; 80% of the staff at the AFL were stood down; only a skeleton staff remained.

From this point all schools in Victoria closed. In contrast bottle shops were allowed to remain open and were inundated with people stocking up on beer and wine.

When we walked through the Botanic Gardens, the Terrace Restaurant had been shut down. For our favourite coffee shop in Domain Rd South Yarra it was its last day open.

In East Melbourne our local restaurants Il Duca, Geppetto’s and The Tippler were all closed, but supplying take-way meals. We ordered pasta from Geppetto’s, just to show support for their enterprise.

The saddest thing was the long queues at Centrelink, shown on television, with people lining up to fill in the forms for income support. The Centrelink website crashed due to the number of calls.

24 March: The headline in this morning’s *Age* was **More Than Two Million could join the dole queue.**

*More than 2 million Australians could lose their jobs, with unemployment expected to soar as businesses begin shutting their doors and standing down or sacking workers because of the coronavirus.*

*Queues of laid-off staff snaked around blocks in Melbourne and Sydney yesterday, in scenes reminiscent of the Great Depression.*

26 March: Another person died, the third in Victoria. All three were men over seventy with pre-existing conditions. The streets and footpaths of East Melbourne were quiet. Few people ventured outside their homes and everyone kept a wide gap between people. The Botanic Gardens were now locked up and we walked in the Fitzroy Gardens. Kere-Kere had become the café of choice. James had locked up the café, leaving one window open for taking coffee orders and a second for paying by credit card only.

28 March: We walked down to the MCG to get some cash from the ATM there and ran into neighbours. Home entertaining, First Sunday lunch, East Melbourne Historical Society meetings were all gone and it seemed the only social life was meeting by accident. Holy Trinity Church had also shut its doors.

Myer had closed down, as had Cotton On, which had 672 stores. 4:39 PM They followed on from Frank Lowy’s closure of his clothing stores. Myer had 10 000 employees, not unemployed.? Country horse racing still continued.

Dymock’s book stores were now closed but would handle all sales online. There were now 685 cases of Covid-19. 95% of these people had recently returned from overseas.

31 March: According to *The Guardian*, there were 4415 cases of Covid-19 in Australia, 266 more than the day before. There had been nineteen deaths, including the first one in Tasmania.

The streets were very quiet and there was almost no traffic on the roads. Most shops were closed and Punt Rd and Bridge Rd were almost empty. The East Melbourne General Store had hand sanitiser at the door. Toscano’s at Victoria Gardens insisted that shoppers put on plastic gloves before handling fruit and vegetables. Coles had separate entries and exits for shoppers, hand sanitiser at the door and trolleys were wiped down as they are returned. People kept distant from each other.

*March wasn’t all terrible, though the queues of unemployed will haunt us. On the plus side, the skies are unpolluted, helicopters and planes no longer cruise overhead, the air is clean, roads can be crossed with minimal fuss and, it seems to me, we’ve become better neighbours.*

\*St Peter’s, Eastern Hill, is of today (10 June) feeding 400 people every day. Financial help would be gratefully accepted. The closure of churches has meant a fall in revenue.