

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MS SUE ERASMUS AND MR RON ERASMUS

I, Sue Erasmus, make this statement with my husband, Ron Erasmus and I, Ron Erasmus, make this statement with my wife, Sue Erasmus. We make this statement together, on the basis of our knowledge.

- 1 This statement is about our experience in Victoria's COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Program (**Quarantine**). We entered Quarantine at the Stamford Plaza Hotel on 1 May 2020 and exited on 14 May 2020.

Background

- 2 In late February 2020, Sue, along with our two daughters (aged 9 and 14 years), joined Ron in India where he had been working for about 12 months.
- 3 Shortly after their arrival, in March 2020, Ron's father became very ill in South Africa. On 19 March 2020 we were told by family that Ron's dad had been placed on dialysis, but that he was in a stable condition. The next day, on 20 March 2020, we were advised that his condition had deteriorated. That same day we decided to book a flight to South Africa to see him. We booked a flight from Mumbai, India to Durban, South Africa departing in the early hours of 22 March 2020.
- 4 We arrived in Durban on 23 March 2020. We had initially planned to stay for approximately seven days. We ended up staying there for five to six weeks.
- 5 Whilst we were in South Africa, on 26 March 2020, the country entered a nationwide lockdown. There were significant restrictions on movement and only those in essential services were permitted to leave their homes (including for exercise). Under the restrictions we were limited in how much we could see Ron's family.
- 6 A few days later, on 30 March 2020 Ron's father passed away.
- 7 Given the restrictions on travel out of South Africa and around the world, it became increasingly difficult for us to navigate our way back to Australia. We booked three flights with commercial carriers which were all cancelled.
- 8 Eventually, with the assistance of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (**DFAT**) and the Australian High Commission in Pretoria we were able to secure seats on a "mercy flight" from Johannesburg to Melbourne that departed on 30 April 2020. Even though we live in Brisbane, we took the flight to Melbourne as we just wanted to get back home as quickly as possible.

- 9 By the time of our flight we were aware through media reports and information from the High Commission that we would be required to enter Hotel Quarantine on arrival in Melbourne. Sue had joined some Facebook groups in advance to get information about how to prepare and what to expect while in Quarantine.

Entering Quarantine

- 10 We were extremely grateful to be back in Australia when we arrived in Melbourne on 1 May 2020. There was a sense of relief among the passengers on the flight with us.
- 11 At the airport we were asked to stand in our family groups, but socially distanced from other travellers. We were all wearing face masks and had our temperature checked.
- 12 We were told we would board a bus and were given a piece of paper that said we were going to the Stamford Plaza Hotel. That was the first time we knew which hotel we were going to.
- 13 We then spoke to a woman sitting at a small table. She gave us a form to fill out that gave an opportunity to provide preferences for our accommodation, such as whether you would like an adjoining room or a balcony. We really wanted both these options because we were a family of four and had already spent an extended period in confined accommodation in South Africa. The woman had said she would call ahead and ask the hotel about this.
- 14 We collected our baggage from the carousel in the airport and took it out to the waiting busses on a trolley. We had a lot of luggage as we had travelled from India where we had all been planning on living for some months. The baggage was loaded onto the bus by baggage handlers. The handlers were wearing masks and gloves.
- 15 On arrival at the hotel we were told that we were the first group of travellers check in there for Quarantine. We waited in the busses for around two hours before we went into the hotel. We were frustrated - the children had not slept on the flight (16 hours) due to wearing face masks, we were not given any suitable food (only a chocolate treat box) between the flight and getting on the bus and had not been able to use the bathrooms(due to queue times and social distancing at the airport). It had also been difficult to get water, it seemed like they didn't have enough on the flight and that they were rationing it. Eventually we asked the driver to let us take the children to the bathroom, which we were allowed to do in small groups. accompanied by hotel guards. They gave us gloves to don before disembarking which made us unable to wash our hands in the washroom as we were instructed to keep all Personal Protective Equipment (**PPE**) on until we boarded the bus again.

- 16 At the hotel, the luggage was unloaded in the lobby by other staff members and was left in the passage next to the lifts until it was taken up with us to our rooms by security guards. We checked in at the front desk where we were given paperwork with information about our stay and the requirements of Quarantine. A security guard took us up to our room and unloaded our luggage, he was wearing a mask and gloves. Ron recalls this as they had quite a long conversation.
- 17 It was about 7:00 or 8:00 o'clock in the evening when we got into the room. The children hadn't eaten since early morning because of the limited food choice on the plane and the time difference; we landed at 4:00 pm and we were unable to buy anything to eat or drink as "detainees" until late that night. The children were very tired and hungry at that stage.
- 18 Nothing was explained to us when we arrived in Quarantine. It was more that we came to a realisation about our situation. We asked again about the balconies and the preference we had expressed at the airport. We were told the hotel had none. Our daughters were given a double bed to share, which was not appropriate due to our youngest's medical condition. The hotel organised a trundle bed for her but there was limited space in the room and this had to be placed against the entryway to our daughters' room. This was a problem later as our daughter's meals were always delivered to that door. We would have to ask someone to move them which meant the guards handling food they were not supposed to handle, or Ron would have to walk down the hallway to get them, which he was not supposed to do.

During Quarantine

Communication, support and continuity of care

- 19 DFAT had been really helpful in the lead up to our entering Quarantine, they had taken down lots of information about our family, including that Ron's father had passed away, that he was dealing with the grief of that and about our daughter's medical condition. But none of that seems to have been communicated to the people responsible for our quarantine in Melbourne. Even after we had explained it all again to the hotel, to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff and to nursing staff they never passed the information on to the next person. We were asked to answer some related questions in writing on our arrival at the hotel, ie health conditions, but this information never translated into action.
- 20 Ron felt as though he experienced his father's passing 14 times while we were in Quarantine. He had to repeat the story every day to the next person. This was a hallmark of our experience, there seemed to us to be very little communication between the people involved and there was no continuity of care or management of the situation.

- 21 Sue had a number of conversations with the nurses, being a nurse herself, to better understand how it was all working. The nurses told us they were being rotated around the different hotels. Within the hotel, there were different nurses working each day; a mental health nurse, emergency nurse and a COVID-19 nurse. They were different people every day, that's why Ron had to keep explaining his circumstances to different people.
- 22 There was an additional level of complexity in that we also had contact with DHHS staff, who were outside the hotel.
- 23 Ron found Quarantine very difficult. He was still grieving his father and continued to work as the Chief Executive Officer of the Indian branch of an Australian Business. Normally, Ron likes to stay active to deal with stress, he will go for a run or similar. But we couldn't do that in Quarantine, and the area and time frame that had been put aside for these activities was unsuitable for even stationary exercise.
- 24 Ron spoke to a DHHS staff member about this and was provided a phone number to call for bereavement counselling. When we called, the person who answered didn't know Ron's circumstances or why he was calling. She did offer to help but Ron didn't feel comfortable. In this initial conversation it had appeared that he had a referral and the other person would have some understanding of what was happening for him, but that wasn't the case. It was a big step for Ron to seek this kind of support, but it was clear that information wasn't being shared and there was no individualisation of care or support. We feel this really exacerbated the difficulties that he was having. In what was already a really difficult time, the lack of care was pretty staggering and really damaging.

Fresh-air breaks and exercise

- 25 When we first arrived in Quarantine we were told we would get a fresh-air break once per week. In the end we did get more frequent fresh-air breaks because we had spoken with the nurses about needing more time outside. The exercise breaks generally occurred in an alleyway beside the hotel. Sometimes the security guards would let us take our masks off during exercise. If a member of the public came by the security guards would move us to the side to let them pass. They encouraged us to bring or something down to exercise with. The alley was very dark, there was no natural light. We had a beanbag we used for tag and a skipping rope we took with us. We were encouraged to use the time and space in this way.

Safety and preparedness

- 26 There was more than one incident while we were in Quarantine that indicated a lack of planning and consideration of the safety of guests.
- 27 There were two fire alarms whilst we were in Quarantine, the first one was on our third day. A number of fire trucks and fire fighters arrived on the site. We could see them out of the room's window. At the same time an announcement came over the PA system telling all guests to stay in their rooms. It took a long time for anything to be done about the alarm. We were on the tenth floor and if there had been a real fire, we don't know if we'd have been able to get out with our children. When the second one went off, around day 9 or 10 we knew they didn't have a plan. They told us again to stay in our rooms until further notice and once the alarm stopped they just told us to go back to what we had been doing before.
- 28 After the first alarm Ron was concerned and called down to reception to complain. He spoke with the hotel manager about what the procedures should be and was told there was a fire evacuation plan on the back of our door. There was a really old plan on the back of the door, it was out of date, hard to read and peeling off, it was just a tiny little sticker. We got the impression they hadn't prepared for having so many quarantined guests and didn't know what they should do if there was a fire.
- 29 On one of our fresh-air breaks, on about day seven, the security guards said they didn't have the usual number of staff, so instead of taking us to the lane by the side of the hotel where we usually exercised, they took us into a pub or bar off the hotel lobby. The furniture had been pushed against the side of the room and we were allowed to play a game in that room. Whilst we were playing Sue jumped and felt a pop in her foot causing her to fall over. The guards didn't know how to respond and just stood back. Ron had to physically pick up Sue and carry her back to the elevators and up to our room on the 10th floor. No one got any help. We think the security guards were reluctant to assist or get a wheelchair because as guests we weren't supposed to touch anything. It was our impression they had no training in how to deal with a first aid situation other than to keep their distance from us.
- 30 Sue's foot was immediately swollen as she removed her shoe and sock in the lift in with the guards present and looking. About half an hour after we got up to the room Sue's foot was not improved with ice so we called the nurses to get some help. Two nurses came up to see us and then they called for a doctor. We had to wait a while for the doctor, about an hour or two. The doctor saw it and thought it needed an Xray so Sue had to go up to hospital. It also took a while for the ambulance to come because they had to wait for a specific type of ambulance, one that had just a stretcher in it, and nothing else, we think to avoid contamination. The guards came up to the room with a wheelchair and handed Sue over to

the paramedics who put her onto a stretcher in the lobby. .The whole process of getting to the hospital took about four hours, we had had gone downstairs for our fresh air break at about 12 o'clock and Sue arrived at the St Vincent's Hospital at about 6 that evening

31 Following a scan they advised Sue it was a fracture and torn ligaments in her midfoot. Sue was taken back to the hotel at about midnight that night. She was on crutches and wearing a moon boot for the remainder of her time in Quarantine. She's had one surgery so far and will need another. Sue was told the recovery would take 6-12 months and currently she can't work.

32 Later in Quarantine Sue also hurt her back while getting into the bath. It was hard for her to manoeuvre in and out of the bath because of her broken foot and the crutches. She slipped a disc and it was very painful. We were offered pain killers but didn't receive other treatment while in Quarantine.

Use of Personal Protective Equipment and testing

33 We observed a lot of inconsistent or improper use of PPE among the staff. For example, some security guards didn't seem to change their gloves. They would wear gloves coming up in the lifts and would press the buttons. Then they would touch the door handle to our room, that we had previously touched without gloves.

34 In a hospital setting, or where contamination and infection control were concerns, you would expect people to wear gloves for a specific activity and to change pairs for every separate interaction. That didn't happen in Quarantine. It was the same with the people unloading the luggage, they would touch all the bags with the same gloves. It seemed to us that the security guards hadn't been properly trained in how to use PPE or even really understand what it was for.

35 Another time we had a nurse come up to our room and she did take her mask off. This was after the first fire drill, we'd all gotten very upset after Ron called down to talk to reception. He was frustrated and may have been short with the reception staff, who also got upset. We got a call back from another staff member and Ron asked me to talk to them, it was a difficult conversation and it seemed like the staff weren't trained to deal with people who were feeling highly anxious. We were all pretty upset at that point so they sent the mental health nurse up to see us. When she came up she stood in the doorway to talk to us. We had one of those hotel doors that closes on its own, so Ron and I stood in the doorway holding it open. She took her mask off and to be honest it was comforting, it felt like she trusted us and she did help to calm us down. I did worry about her safety though because, even though we had our

masks on, she had taken hers off and was standing right there in the doorway for at least 15 minutes.

36 When we first came into Quarantine Sue was feeling sick, she had a headache and a sore throat. On the first day we called and talked to the nurses about it who said to let them know if it got worse. We also talked to them about the flight and how difficult it had been to get water, so we thought Sue may have been dehydrated. They offered some aspirin, but they didn't offer a test and at that stage Sue didn't push for one.

37 Then on day four of Quarantine a group of nurses came around to our room and offered a test. They weren't in any way insistent about it and didn't try to convince you. They would just ask "do you want one" and if you said you didn't they would move on. Ron decided to have one at that point, we thought that if Ron's was positive, we probably all were, but his test was negative.

38 Sue decided to get tested on about day 11 to make sure she wasn't positive before we went back to Brisbane.

39 We thought the testing was being conducted by an external group. It wasn't the nurses who were in the hotel providing general care or mental health support. This was surprising to us because it didn't seem like a good idea to have even more people coming in and out of the hotel. Sue thought it seemed like they were bringing "clean" staff into a "dirty" environment.

Leaving Quarantine

40 Because flights were so scarce at the time, we had booked a flight from Melbourne to Brisbane for the evening of our last day in Quarantine, right when we arrived.

41 About a week before this we had received a call from DHHS staff to ask if we had any arrangements for getting back to Brisbane. We told them we had booked a flight, which they noted down. They asked us if it was suitable for us to be released at 12:00 or 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon, which was good for us because we had a late afternoon flight, so we thought everything was sorted with our departure time.

42 The night before we left Quarantine a document was slid under our door with information about exiting, it was a release from detention notice. There was a space on the form for the time we were to leave but it was blank. Because it was blank we phoned down to reception and they told us we were being released at 10 o'clock in the morning. This was frustrating because we had already arranged a time with DHHS. We had a lot of discussions with staff

that night but by the time we went to bed we still didn't know what time we were meant to leave.

- 43 On the morning of our release they called us at 8:30 or 9:30 and said we would be released in 30 minutes, but we weren't ready at that stage and didn't have all our luggage packed. We also needed more time to get ready because of Sue's broken foot and back injury. After that we couldn't get any information about when we would be allowed to leave and Ron was becoming more and more frustrated. At one point a staff member said we could just leave whenever we wanted, but we did not feel comfortable leaving when the paperwork wasn't completed properly, they still hadn't given us a document with the timeslot filled in. Eventually they sent up a notice with an exit time of 1:45 pm that was signed by an Authorised Officer and we left Quarantine at about 2 or 2:30 o'clock in the afternoon.
- 44 We had asked the hotel to ensure we had a maxicab so we could go to the airport together and because of the crutches and Sue being unable to carry anything. This was affirmed however when we got outside there were only normal taxis. The security guards helped us to load our luggage onto a trolley outside our room. They were wearing masks and gloves but again it was the same gloves they had come up in the elevator with.
- 45 They did ask us to wear PPE for our entire journey home to Brisbane but did not ask if we had any available still.

General Observations

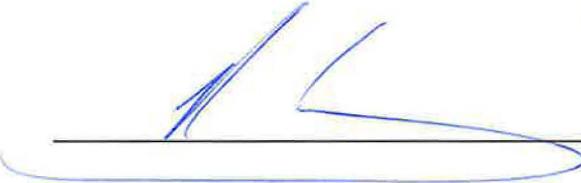
- 46 From our experience in hotel quarantine we gained the impression that the whole thing was very poorly organised. Communication was appalling and inconsistent and added to the overall stress of the information. It was clear the security guards didn't understand how or why they were to use PPE or have any first aid training.
- 47 At what was already a difficult time for our family, quarantine was always going to be difficult, but it really was made so much harder by how disorganised and disjointed the whole process was. The Stamford Hotel in our opinion on many levels was unprepared and unsuitable as a venue for mandatory detention. We were glad to be in Australia but did not feel safe there; we feel that Sue's injury was another visible outcome of the lack of measures put in place.
- 48 We are disappointed that even now, 3 months later we have no acknowledgment or even incident report from the Dept of Health of Sue's accident under their duty of care and premises under their control.

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. M. O.', written over a horizontal line.

Print name SUE ERASMUS

Date 18/08/2020

Signature 

Print name RON ERASMUS

Date 18/08/2020