



# CAMPUS REVIEW

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Chief Medical Officer Professor Brendan Murphy with Prime Minister Scott Morrison at a media conference in Canberra last week. Photo: Gary Ramage/ News Corp Australia

## Peak social work body calls for 'compassion' and 'care' as COVID-19 discrimination cases rise

By: Wade Zaglas in News, Top Stories February 17, 2020 0

The Australian Council of Heads of Social Work has joined a chorus of other organisations and individuals concerned about racism directed towards the Chinese-Australian community amid the worldwide spread of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus).

After highlighting the steps universities are taking to protect their students, staff and the community at large – including online offerings and delays to the start of first semester – the council expressed concern about the "potential for one of our largest and most important communities to be stigmatised".

"Being scared of catching a potentially deadly virus is natural and can even be positive if it results in known and recommended preventative measures such as staying at home if exposed and symptomatic," the council said.

"This fear response can also translate into shunning or ostracising specific communities based on their country of origin.

"We hope Australia is resilient to this temptation."

The council stressed that such social exclusion is associated with poor mental and physical health and wouldn't help the country combat the threat. It also said this was a time to come together as a community and to act "with compassion and care".

"At the end of the day, there is no 'them'. There is just 'us' dealing with a global crisis. Let's keep fear from driving us to divisions that will outlast this danger."

Earlier this month 2,000 Chinese students at the University of York, England, issued a statement calling for tolerance and respect after racist and xenophobic comments were published on the anonymous confessions page Yorfess.

Meanwhile, president of the New Zealand International Students Association Sabrina Alhady told TVNZ 1 that Chinese students are suffering from racism, stress and even lack of academic support since the outbreak.

Alhady called it "straight out discrimination", citing examples of landlords denying Chinese students access to properties they had already paid to rent.

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Cases of racial discrimination have been widely reported by the Chinese-Australian community, with some mentioning on social media how they are fearing for their safety.

Last week a surgeon on the Gold Coast, who is of Chinese and New Zealand heritage, said she was surprised when a Caucasian male patient would not shake her hand.

"I was running my clinic and we had seen a patient and he came in, and it's usual for us to shake hands with patients," Dr Rhea Liang told *HuffPost Australia*.

"He stuck out his hand and then made a joke, 'I probably shouldn't shake your hand because you might have coronavirus'. This was in front of a nurse, two medical students, and a few other people standing."

 **Derek Robinson**  
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Australia's chief medical officer Brendan Murphy last week condemned racial discrimination towards Chinese-Australians.

"We're very concerned about xenophobia and any sort of racial profiling which is completely abhorrent," he told reporters at a press conference.

Murphy also said there was no reason why Australians should be wearing masks in public and shunning people of different ethnic backgrounds.

"There is no reason for people to be wearing masks, there is no reason for people to avoid anybody of any particular background or appearance," he said.

President of the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Professor Beth Crisp said that, while many Australians don't know it, social work is one of the disciplines Chinese students study at Australian universities.

"Respect for diversity and the protection of human rights are central to the practice of social work, and our work as social work educators," Crisp said.

"The statement of the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work in respect of COVID-19 was developed not only based on our concerns for Chinese social work students studying in Australia, but also for all Chinese students and non-students in Australia.

"There is a long history of discrimination being experienced by Chinese people in Australia, dating back to the Gold rushes in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. While we would like to believe that discrimination of Chinese people is past history, we know that is not the case.

"The emergence of COVID-19 is already becoming another rationale used to justify discrimination against Chinese people in Australia – not only those who are recently arrived, but in some instances people whose families have lived in Australia for decades.

"Governments have an important role in determining community attitudes and it is essential that any policy decisions of the Australian Government do not contribute to discrimination against Chinese people who are in Australia or seeking to come here.

"Policy decisions must be evidence-based and not made in response to community perceptions about COVID-19 which may not reflect the latest information about this emerging virus."

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Email [dallas.bastian@apned.com.au](mailto:dallas.bastian@apned.com.au)

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