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Monday, October 18, 2021

Dear Students, Interns, Staff and Faculty of the Gestalt Centre,

I hope you are all well and have enjoyed some sun and outdoor fun over the weekend. I guess, like us, you are still processing the changes to lock down announced yesterday and starting to make some tentative plans to see friends and family in the next few weeks and months.

The news is not so good for GTA students, and it now looks inevitable that we will not return to teaching on-site this year. The Victorian Government's roadmap currently states that on-site learning will recommence for people who are fully vaccinated from 5 November 2021. Sadly, as we are in the last few weeks of the GTA training program, we will not have the opportunity to return to indoor face-to-face teaching this year. However, the changes do mean outdoor gatherings will be possible for small groups and perhaps you can find ways to meet up and finish the year with some social time in your training groups. When larger outdoor gatherings are possible, we will organise a community picnic (more news on that soon).

It's been hard to ignore the many challenges COVID-19 has thrust upon us these past 2 years. It presses directly and at the edges of our individual and collective consciousness, impacting many aspects of our lifestyles and well-being. We have needed to flex and change regularly and there have been many disappointments and frustrations.

In Melbourne, we have endured a phenomenal amount of time in lockdown. We have all been impacted differently, yet there is a sense that we have been going through something together. Perhaps a sense of solidarity, even community, in these stressful circumstances. I know I have appreciated the support of regular contact with my colleagues, interns and students as we have negotiated the pathway from room to zoom (and back again).

However, the issue of vaccines, and in particular vaccine mandates, does have the potential to create division in the training groups and the Gestalt Centre more broadly, as it has in the wider community.

From the beginning, many of us had our hopes set on a vaccine to help manage the spread of COVID-19. In the past few months, many of us have been vaccinated. However, some in our gestalt community are hesitant. Some would rather wait or perhaps not be vaccinated at all. Any perspective that differs from what is either an entrenched or emerging normative view risks marginalisation. So, it makes sense to me that people who are in this position may feel quite vulnerable to being othered or isolated. I feel for them.

On the other hand, others are anxious about contracting COVID-19. The risks associated with contracting the virus, the recent high infection numbers, and the indication that these will rise with the end of restrictions in the following weeks, concerns them greatly.

Both perspectives are understandable. Unfortunately, they are not easily reconcilable, and hard to hold in any creative tension.

I want you to know that the Gestalt Centre leaders are taking these concerns very seriously. We are in close contact and speak regularly. Carolyn, Leanne, and I have committed to a path that keeps us in line with government restrictions and mandates but not ahead of them. Our policy is to remain in dialogue: curious, flexible, and kind. However, we are also aware of the competing concerns and the potential for division and conflict.

I know that as a community, we can hold space for difference. Our theory supports conversations about complexity, and I feel like I am witnessing this in action at the Gestalt Centre. Please remain open to your peers' differing concerns in whatever contexts you find yourself in. Listen to the dilemmas of others as you would want to be listened to.

Currently it is a government requirement that all authorised workers must be vaccinated to attend on-site. This includes all staff, faculty and interns who wish to work face-to-face. I can let you know that all staff and faculty are fully vaccinated. Most interns are vaccinated, but some have opted to see clients offsite. Currently there is no mandate requiring clients to be vaccinated.

We expect there to be many changes to the Government vaccination policy between now and the commencement of teaching next year. Our commitment to you is that we will continue to read the government releases and let you know of any requirements that will shape face to face teaching in 2022 as soon as it becomes necessary, likely sometime early next year. The bottom line is, we will need to comply with any government mandates, whilst remaining committed to offering a safe environment, and supporting as much flexibility in access to the training and clinical services we offer as we can.

We remain committed to teaching and delivering the clinic's services in person. The news regarding ongoing lockdowns is relatively good, as the Premier is saying this should be the last citywide lockdown. However, the road is not predictable, and at least in the short-term some peoples' capacity to attend in person may be impacted. We will all need to remain willing to pivot to be inclusive of each other's needs going forward.

The leadership team, faculty and staff are committed to finding ways of talking about these issues and I hope you find space to discuss the impacts of this situation as needed.

Kind regards,

Tony Jackson