

COVIDSafe: The Failure of an App

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The returns have not been impressive. For an app essentially anointed as a saviour for tracing purposes in the worst pandemic in a century, COVIDSafe is a lesson in exaggerated prowess and diminished performance.

It was billed as necessitous and supremely useful. Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** was fashionably vulgar in linking the use of the app with an important goal: getting watering holes opened. “If that isn’t an incentive for Australians to download COVIDSafe, I don’t know what is,” Morrison [claimed](#) in May last year. The prime minister even equated the use of the app to protecting yourself before going outdoors. “If you want to go outside when the sun is shining, you have got to put sunscreen on. This is the same thing.”

Numerous organisations across Australia, private and public, jumped to the call in a concerted effort to embrace surveillance in order to suppress the virus. The National Waste and Recycling Industry Council, to name one enthusiastic participant, [claimed](#) that the COVIDSafe App, “together with good hygiene, safe work practices and social distancing will help protect the health of waste and recycling staff and our committee.” Seven million people also seemed to agree in downloading the app.

But problems began to burgeon. Identifying close contacts did not seem to be the app’s forte. There were issues about its performance on Apple devices. The iOS version, for instance, had a habit of trying to link with each device a user’s phone had ever been connected to. “Every time the Bluetooth controller disconnects from a device, such as when COVIDSafe successfully exchanges data with another app user, it will attempt to reconnect 15 seconds later,” [wrote](#) Stilgherrian in July last year.

New South Wales Health Minister **Brad Hazzard** [had to concede](#) in October 2020 that

COVIDSafe had “obviously not worked as well as we had hoped”. To this could be added that hovering cloud of privacy concerns and trust in government.

The review by consultants Abt Associates, commissioned by the federal government and delivered in March this year, did not make for pretty reading. It took the persistence of *The Canberra Times* to [obtain a more complete version](#) of the report which had initially been released in severely redacted form. (The [redacted evaluation](#) was rather more glowing in concluding that “the COVIDSafe app was the correct tool to employ.”)

The app, [it was found](#), had added to the workloads of state tracing teams “without optimisation of benefits.” This included, for example, the presence of false close contacts among 205 individuals flagged by the app (some 61%) with 30% already identified through standard contact tracing. A mere 2 per cent of total close contacts in NSW between March and November had been detected by the app, with none in Victoria and Queensland.

By May 2021, costing as much as \$100,000 a month to continue its operation, the Digital Transformation Agency chief **Randall Brugeaud** [explained](#) to Senates estimates that, “COVIDSafe has moved into what we call the business-as-usual state and so we apply very small amounts of maintenance.” With a matter of fact telling that would have proved unbearable to the thrifty types, Brugeaud suggested that the amount could change to \$200,000 a month “to allow us to make future changes.” These were additional totals to the \$6.7 million the app had already cost till that point, most of which had been swallowed by development outlays.

Such costs are far from draw dropping, given the number of partners this crowded venture has involved. The Amazon Web Services (AWS) platform may well claim to have led the pack, but then came Delv, Boston Consulting Group and the Melbourne-based outfit Shine Solutions. In November 2020, it [was reported](#) that the latter had received \$350,000 in increased payments from the federal government, bringing the then total to \$2 million for work on an app that had, as yet, to identify any new close contact anywhere other than the state of New South Wales.

Despite an entrenched stubbornness, the Department of Health [would have to concede](#) in July that a mere 779 people who tested positive for COVID-19 had availed themselves of the app. “The relatively low number of cases in Australia and effectiveness of our contact tracing processes has created an environment in which it has rarely been necessary for public officials to use the app, except to confirm cases through manual processes.”

COVIDSafe keeps company with several similar apps on tracing that have been left in their wake by renewed infection waves and the discovery of vaccines. But that does not mean that their advocates have not stopped their fires of conviction. A [co-authored contribution](#) in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* insists that we should not have too many hang-ups on overly centralised data in terms of what risks it poses to privacy. Decentralised systems, argue the authors, are also inefficient and risky. “When these points are understood, it becomes clear that we must rethink our approach to digital contact racing in our fight against COVID-19.”

Any identifiable moral here must lie in the risk posed by zeal. COVIDSafe never replaced the sleuthing efforts of industrious human contact tracers and may have even inhibited them. “The lure of automating the painstaking process of contact tracing is apparent,” a [co-authored report](#) from the Brookings Institute asserts. “But to date, no one has demonstrated that it’s possible to do so reliably despite numerous concurrent attempts.”

The authors even go so far as to suggest that such apps can “serve as vehicles for abuse and disinformation, while providing a false sense of security to justify reopening local and national economies well before it is safe to do so.”

Even now, on its long feted deathbed, one keeping company with a range of other feats of government misspending, you can still go to the federal Health Ministry’s [website](#) to see the following: “The COVIDSafe app is a tool that helps identify people exposed to coronavirus (COVID-19).” In not distinguishing SARS-CoV-2 as the virus, with COVID-19 being the disease, we are already off to a rollicking start. But the belief in the role of this tool remains steadfast. “This helps us support and protect you, your friends and family.” The eyes, in the Morrison lingo, remain on the pub prize.

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