

25 October 2022

OZSAGE Position statement: Cruise ship epidemic and risk to small towns in Western Australia

There is an epidemic of COVID-19 on board the [cruise ship Coral Princess](#), which is due to visit some small towns in Western Australia, starting with Geraldton at 8am tomorrow, October 26th.

We recommend that the cruise ship Coral Princess should not allow passengers to disembark at Geraldton, Busselton and Albany. These are small towns without strong health infrastructure, that would be disproportionately affected by any sudden surge in their COVID-19 case load, by a COVID-19 epidemic.

Whilst the ship is testing symptomatic passengers, a large proportion of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is from presymptomatic or asymptomatic people, who may infect the residents of these towns. Anywhere from 30-50% of transmissions are thought to arise from asymptomatic people. If passengers are allowed to disembark in these small towns, the minimum requirement should be a negative rapid antigen test on the day of disembarkation. Anyone who tests positive should not be allowed to disembark. Those with a negative RAT test should wear a mask while on shore. This would go some way toward protecting the health and safety of local residents, including Aboriginal communities. Almost 10% of Geraldton is Aboriginal.

OzSAGE has previously made comment on risk in the pandemic for significant outbreaks in [rural, regional and remote communities](#) in the setting of reduced testing capacity, primary care and hospital services, lack of appropriate safe air ventilation, fitted N95 masks and other controls. We note that medical transfers to Perth require scarce resources. We have also highlighted the unprecedented impact of the [Omicron waves in Australia in 2022](#), with more immune evasive variants dominating now. OzSAGE is also concerned about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and the impact of COVID-19 on our Indigenous people.

We believe the strongest prevention measure is to disallow the ship from docking in these small, vulnerable communities. At a minimum, passengers should not be allowed to disembark unless they have a negative COVID-19 rapid antigen test of high sensitivity on the day, and should wear a mask while ashore. Surveillance in these towns, including Broome, where the ship docked on October 24 2022, should be increased to detect potential community epidemics.