

ELIMINATING AND LEARNING TO LIVE WITH COVID-19: MODELLING AUSTRALIA'S WAY THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

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Background:

In June 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued around the world, Australia recorded successive days with no locally acquired cases. This had not been anticipated, nor had it been the objective of the national response strategy. This moment, in which local elimination of the SARS-CoV-2 virus appeared to have inadvertently come within reach, has fundamentally shaped the nation's experience of the pandemic since. 'Covid-zero' was subsequently pursued and maintained, largely successfully, in all states and territories until June 2021. However, this then presented Australia with the relatively unique challenge of deliberately 'undoing' these achievements by progressively easing restrictions and reopening the country – effectively 'letting in' the virus in order to 'learn to live with' it.

Methods:

This study examines how the role of mathematical modelling has shifted throughout these phases of the pandemic, taking a sociological perspective to view models as performative. It is based on qualitative interviews with 23 modellers and others involved in modelling for Australia's COVID-19 response.

Results:

The widespread use of modelling during the pandemic can be understood to have enacted a 'model society' – which refers in one sense to a society in which risk and uncertainty are governed through the use of models, and in another sense to the representations of societal outcomes, both those to be sought and those to be avoided, that are offered by models.

Conclusion:

We show how distinct versions of 'model society' characterised each of the two main phases of Australia's COVID-19 experience (pursuing 'COVID-zero' and 'learning to live with' the virus), with shifts in the vision of successful pandemic response occurring as models, and the policy-making assemblages of which they are a part, recursively imagined and realised the steps towards first eliminating, and later living with, COVID-19.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None.