



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light - 25 September 2021 – “**

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They are itchy and scratchy. They are kind of invasive. If you were somewhat inclined, they may even be claustrophobic-I'm talking facemasks. I have really had to persevere with wearing the blighters. I find the mask constantly creeps up into my eyes or slips down off my nose. If it's not slipping down or creeping up, it sits under my eye bags, exaggerating them beyond any reasonable proportions. When I am on a plane I fall to sleep and get paranoid I will wake up with a wet patch of drool on the mask.

You can't read people's facial expressions. You can't tell if they are smiling or grimacing at you. Paranoia can set in. It doesn't help when the office building manager says "Wearing that mask makes your ears look like you have been going backwards on that scooter!"!

We have all done an about face (haha) since the latest Level 4. Those wearing facemasks used to be relatively scarce up here. Now everyone's at it. Well, almost everyone.

Judith Collins the National Party leader was filmed by a bystander in a Queenstown café last weekend, ordering ice cream without a mask on, which is in breach of the Government's COVID-19 Alert Level 2 rules. She copped flack for her big fat hypocrisy, as she barefacedly had abused New Zealand's favourite virologist, Dr Siouxsie Wiles – a pot kettle black super cluster if there ever was.

Facemask-wearing seems to be one of the latest battle lines in our war against Covid. You will no doubt have heard reports of members of the public lashing out and turning feral against business owners, when they ask customers to wear masks before entering their businesses, as reported in the Advocate on Tuesday.

People with underlying health conditions or disabilities are exempt from wearing facemasks. Eligible conditions include asthma and breathing problems, being deaf or hard of hearing, speech impairments, autism, post traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions. Those who fit these descriptors can obtain an "Exemption card" to verify that they don't have to wear one. This seems straight forward but, oh no, no, no -it's not: like many a new Covid rule, the government is faced with a balancing act. Rules need to be effective and encourage compliance, whilst being easy to achieve and straight forward. This can lead to

grey areas. These rules tend to rely on good will and people not taking advantage of any loopholes.

The facemask exemption card started off being straight forward and flexible. People could download a card from the Ministry of Health website. People with exemptions do not have to show their exemptions. Places of businesses aren't responsible for making people wear masks when they enter their premises. Businesses can however have their own policies of only allowing customers to enter their business only with a facemask, which further complicates the issue. To my disbelief hundreds of the exemptions were mass downloaded, by anti-lockdown groups, The Freedom Alliance, printed hundreds out and issued them to random Wellington commuters back in April.

There was a vaguely disturbing video on News Hub, which had been taken by a woman on the North Shore, of a shop keeper who was patiently trying to usher her out for not wearing a mask. She repeatedly screeched that she had a medical condition that she did not have to show her exemption and that he was discriminating against her. The shop keeper repeatedly responded, "please leave, it is our policy for people to wear masks to keep our customers safe". I don't know if she had a medical condition, and the video and yelling did nothing to enlighten me. Would have been solved all round with a clearly communicated exemption process.

Since then the government has tightened up the ready availability of these cards. You can no longer download them straight off government websites but need to go through the Disabled Persons Assembly (DPA). Consequently, DPA has been swamped and inundated with enquiries and requests for the exemptions.

The government has done it's best to accommodate disabled people in a flexible and easily accessible way, but this has been thwarted by individuals who seem hell bent on pushing their own selfish agendas with no regard to impact it has on others around them. This is compounded by vigilantes who go out of their way to call out people who aren't following the rules but unbeknownst to them may be exempt.

It's like mobility permit cards issues on steroids, with people abusing the mobility parking, people misusing disabled parking permits and people attacking disabled people when they are legitimately parking in a mobility park. Same stuff, different permit. Let's sort this to provide true equity for those who really cannot wear facemasks. And for innocent shopkeepers everywhere.

*Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.*