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Commission warns against discriminatory behaviour as coronavirus fears rise

The Queensland Human Rights Commission is urging the public to be calm amidst growing fears of coronavirus and increasingly hostile attitudes towards the Chinese community in Australia as a result.

“We are very disturbed to hear of discrimination and even vilification of members of Australia’s Chinese community seemingly caused by people’s fear of coronavirus,” says Queensland Human Rights Commissioner, Scott McDougall.

“The circulation of fake news regarding the virus is particularly concerning, given the panic it creates and the way that panic manifests – in some cases, it appears to be creating a level of fear and mistrust of the Chinese community as a whole.”

Media reports over recent days have included increasing numbers of stories of discrimination and harassment experienced by the Chinese community, including being refused entry to their rental accommodation, shops and restaurants refusing to serve Chinese patrons, and rising levels of street harassment. Social media commentary is also becoming increasingly anti-Chinese, and police have had to assist with crowd control on the Gold Coast where paramedics were attending a suspected coronavirus patient.

The Commission warns that these behaviours could constitute discrimination or vilification and therefore be in breach of the Anti-Discrimination Act.

“The Act does permit actions which are reasonably necessary to protect public health, but the community does need to be careful that these decisions are made on that basis and not on the basis of race – in other words, treating people differently, and harshly, simply because they appear to be members of the Chinese community,” says Commissioner McDougall.

Discrimination on the basis of race is unlawful in areas of public life in Queensland including work, education, accommodation, and the provision of goods and services. Vilification – where hatred, ridicule or contempt is incited towards a person or group because of their race – is also against the law.

The Commissioner is urging people to make sure they are getting their information from reliable sources and to support the Chinese community instead of targeting them.

“While coronavirus does pose a serious public health concern, it is being dealt with by health authorities as effectively as possible. The last thing we want is for this situation to create opportunities for people to be targeted solely because of their race.”

If you have experienced or witnessed any of this behaviour and would like to lodge a complaint or find out if it’s possible for you to do so, you can contact the Commission on 1300 130 670 or at enquiries@ghrc.qld.gov.au.

Updates on the virus and its management can and should be sought from the [federal Department of Health website](#).

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