

CONFUSION REIGNS IN INTERNATIONAL AIR TRAVEL

Air carriers and airports have been caught in the whirlwind confusion that surrounds air transport health regulations for months but never as much as right now. Blamed for its slow uptake at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian Government is now throwing science-based logic and operational capacity aside in favor of what could be described as politically motivated reactions to the latest variant, regardless of the cost to carriers, airports and passengers.

Carriers and airports are concerned with government expectations that are unrealistic. To announce that all international passengers arriving at the 18 Canadian airports, authorized to receive these flights, will be tested without first checking the feasibility of such an undertaking is irresponsible and demonstrates either a lack of concern for the implementation of a promise made by a politician or a complete disregard of logistics and practicality.

Passenger confusion and concerns are resulting in massive cancellations of travel and vacation plans. ATAC strongly encourages the Government of Canada to follow a science and data-driven approach in dealing with the COVID-19 Omicron variant and not a political motivated populist approach. The logical and safe approach proposed by the subject matter experts within the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA) is fully supported by ATAC and is elaborated upon in their following statements:

ICAO Bulletin: *In line with the latest recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO), ICAO issued a new global bulletin on December 1st urging a more measured and evidence-based approach to countries' national air transport restrictions due to the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant. Until more detailed assessments are available, the UN aviation agency is encouraging countries to continue combatting the spread of COVID-19, and specifically the Omicron variant, using the recommendations and guidance contained in the ICAO Council Aviation Recovery Task Force's (CART) Take-off Guidance for Air Travel through the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis, in addition to the third edition of ICAO's Manual on COVID-19 Cross-Border Risk Management. The new bulletin was issued under the authority of ICAO Secretary General Juan Carlos Salazar, who commented that "It's critical that we continue to respond to this disease and its variants on the basis of the best available science and evidence."*

Statement from IATA's Director General:

Governments are responding to the risks of the new coronavirus variant in emergency mode causing fear among the traveling public. As quickly as possible we must use the experience of the last two years to move to a coordinated data-driven approach that finds safe alternatives to border closures and quarantine. Travel restrictions are not a long-term solution to control COVID variants.

In addition to adopting actions that are based on data-driven evidence to address the ongoing practical travel concerns, ATAC strongly recommends that alternatives, ignored up until now, such as rapid antigen testing which is acceptable in the US and many other jurisdictions with its associated accessibility and cost effectiveness, must be seriously considered and adopted in Canada. This would provide an equivalent level of testing and better cater to the airport infrastructure inability to deal with current testing requirements.

ATAC looks to the government to find safe and practical solutions as quickly as possible. Consulting with airline and airport operators, rather than simply informing them minutes before press releases are issued, would go a long way in getting it right from the start.

The Government must be commended for setting up effective communication working groups to inform and gather comments from stakeholders. The problem lies in the fact that little or no delay is granted and this transforms into dictating directives that are a fait accompli. Treating operators like partners in the resolve of what is practical would greatly clear up operational issues before the fact and not push everyone in complete chaos.

Concerns and real implementation problems raised during government-industry calls are politely received with little if any follow-up. Does Transport Canada not sit at the Government COVID-19 Crisis Center and get to raise operational concerns? Hopefully, its role is not that of conduit to inform stakeholders of the decisions made by people with no operational knowledge whatsoever.

This is not the first time that industry has made this point. Why is it too much to ask to have invested stakeholders' input upstream of the decision rather than scramble to deal with an impractical directive?

John McKenna
President and CEO