APRIL 3, 2020   Ashley Argoon, Education Editor

LACK OF MATHS KNOWLEDGE BEHIND HOARDING, EXPERTS SAY

Society's lack of mathematics know-how may have led to mass hoarding and a poor understanding of the pandemic, leading experts say.

People's inability to calculate how many rolls of toilet paper they'd use for extended periods, or not knowing how far 1.5 metres was for safe physical distancing, may have caused poor responses during the crisis.

Monash University lecturer in mathematics education, Dr Jennifer Hall, said people's inability to estimate and extrapolate the supplies they needed led to irrational behaviour.

"If you asked Joe Blow on the street how much toilet paper they use in a week, they wouldn't know," Dr Hall said.

"If you don't understand something, you buy into the hype."

She said an improvement in people's numeracy skills could have reduced public disorder.

Dr Hall heard a broadcaster on commercial radio incorrectly estimate that 1.5m was an "arm's length" from another person.

Social media had also been thriving with people comparing Australia's COVID-19 cases to other countries despite extreme variations in population, density, demographics and health care.

"You can't extrapolate like that, there's too many variables," Dr Hall said.

Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute director Tim Brown said "nothing could further illustrate how valuable math, statistics and interpretation of data is than what has happened in this pandemic".

"It's a core skill for daily life," Professor Brown said.

"It goes to being able to interpret graphs, to see how things are growing at a rate that's terrifyingly high."

Prof Brown said much like a virus can spread, rumours about toilet paper can do exactly the same thing.

"One person getting anxious will spread that anxiety and it's going to lead to exponential growth of anxiety in the public."

He said the importance of mathematics and sciences has never been demonstrated more greatly.

"We know in the future, so many careers are going to rely on data science," he said.