Hospitals in crisis as Australian COVID-19 infections surge

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Around Australia, more than 116,000 new COVID-19 infections were reported today, smashing yesterday's record high of 78,166. Per capita, the pandemic is now growing faster in Australia than in the United States.

While New South Wales (NSW) remains the worst-affected state, with 45,098 new cases reported today, infections are increasing rapidly in every state and territory, except Western Australia, which has not yet opened its borders to the rest of the country.

In Victoria, 51,356 infections were reported today, including the results of around 20,000 rapid antigen tests (RATs) taken earlier in the week, but registered yesterday. Even discounting these, daily case numbers in the state have increased more than four-fold in the space of one week.

Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley said today's figures were "exactly what we wanted to happen," because "we knew there were undiagnosed cases out there." The ghoulish comment, welcoming infections that will lead to serious illness and death, follows the state Labor government's refusal to implement even limited health measures recommended by medical experts, including caps on attendance at indoor venues and mass super-spreading events.

The inclusion of RAT results underscores what has been clear for several weeks—the official figures are a vast underestimation of the true level of infection in the community. NSW and Queensland will soon follow Victoria in allowing individuals to register their RAT results. Even so, with RAT kits in short supply around the country, the majority of infections will likely remain uncounted for some time.

Queensland reported 11,174 new infections, the third straight day of more than 10,000. Almost 34 percent of tests in the state were positive.

Tasmania registered 2,223 new cases, more than the total number recorded throughout the pandemic in the state before Tuesday.

Record high infection figures were also recorded in South Australia (4,274), the Australian Capital Territory (1,305) and the Northern Territory (594).

Twenty-five deaths from COVID-19 were reported in Australia today, nine each in NSW and Victoria, two in Queensland and five in South Australia.

The rapidly growing surge of COVID-19 has forced numerous hospitals in Sydney, the NSW capital, to abandon the separation of infected patients from those who have not tested positive.

A senior Westmead Hospital doctor told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "With Delta, we had 'red wards' or dedicated COVID-19 wards but now the hospital is ensuring most wards can take patients who are positive."

The doctor said the hospital had resorted to triaging patients in their cars because the emergency department was full.

The *Daily Telegraph* this morning reported it had received a leaked email, written by Mohammad Khadra, head of surgery at Nepean Hospital, stating the hospital would "do away with treating Covid positive patients any differently to Covid negative patients.

"They are both going to be treated as a negative patient but with universal precautions of mask (including the patient), eye protection and hand hygiene," the email continued.

This was necessary, Khadra wrote, because "numbers are growing and staff are diminishing with more and more positives in the facility. I think we have to assume that in any theatre, the probability is either the patient or staff are positive."

According to the *Herald*, Liverpool Hospital, where more than 200 patients have COVID, is also treating people with the virus on non-COVID wards. Around 260 workers at the hospital, including junior doctors, have contracted the virus and a further 100 are isolating as close contacts.

An intensive care nurse told the *Herald* the hospital faced a "mass depletion of experience" because at least 20 ICU nurses had resigned after the Delta wave. "There aren't enough senior nurses," she said.

NSW Health's Critical Intelligence Unit revealed yesterday that 5,218 health workers in the state were in

COVID-19 isolation, more than one third higher than the 3,846 reported two days earlier.

The state yesterday released new modelling predicting COVID-19 hospitalisations would rise to between 3,158 and 6,000 before the end of January, with up to 600 patients requiring treatment in an ICU.

Amid the mounting crisis, NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet declared in a press conference yesterday, "even in a worst-case scenario [the health system] is in a strong position to deal with the challenges that we'll face over the next few weeks."

The reality is, the NSW health system is already in a catastrophic state, with 1,795 COVID-19 patients hospitalised for COVID-19, and 145 in ICU, less than one-third and one-quarter respectively of the "worst-case scenario" outlined in the modelling.

At present, according to the *Guardian*, 6,400 of NSW's 9,500 public hospital beds are occupied by non-COVID patients. While an additional 3,000 beds in private hospitals can also be used if necessary, the "worst-case scenario" would see virtually every bed filled across the state. In reality the capacity is likely to go far lower as increasing numbers of health workers contract the virus.

Australian Medical Association (AMA) NSW President Dr Danielle McMullen hit back at Perrottet's claims, telling the *Telegraph*: "Hospitals and primary care are collapsing under the weight of these massive case numbers."

McMullen confirmed the rapid increase in hospital admissions was already resulting in an "intermingling of positive and negative patients."

"That means increased lines of transmission with vulnerable people in hospital, so we think the government needs to do something to flatten the curve, slow the Omicron so we can maintain capacity to deliver urgent and usual care," she said.

Victorian hospitals also face a staffing crisis, with more than 300 critical care workers in isolation or infected with the virus.

While Perrottet insisted yesterday, "opening up is the best thing we can do for our economy," the reality is that economic activity has tanked as infections have soared. According to ANZ, spending on dining and shopping in Sydney and Melbourne was 39 percent lower in the first week of 2022 than in the week ending December 24.

David Plank, head of Australian Economics at the firm, said: "The data shows starkly how behaviour is impacted by surging case numbers even without government intervention."

The decline in spending reflects a widening chasm between the Australian political establishment's criminal "let it rip" stance, and a working class that is deeply concerned about the raging virus.

While many people are sensibly taking whatever measures they can to avoid exposure to COVID-19 from non-essential activities, the continued refusal of state, federal and territory governments to implement lockdowns or serious public health measures leaves workers with little choice but to attend work and risk infection, illness and death.

One Sydney musician aptly described the situation in a Facebook post yesterday. He wrote: "Almost every single musician I know has had COVID. Why? Because the only way that we get to do our jobs now is to run the gauntlet and risk getting a virus so that we can pay our bills. I literally had a string of gigs in a weekend and thought, 'there's no way I'm not going to get COVID.' And I did."

There are clear signs of widespread workplace transmission of the virus. Up to 40 percent of Coles' and 20 percent of Woolworths' warehouse workers are off due to COVID, while trucking companies and fruit and vegetable suppliers are reporting shortages of up to 50 percent across the eastern states.

As a result, businesses, in lockstep with unions, are demanding further changes to "close contact" rules to force employees back to work, even if they are infectious, in line with what has already been carried in hospitals and aged care.

At yesterday's press conference, NSW Health Deputy Secretary Susan Pearce declared: "To suggest that a couple of months ago that we could've foreseen this is not right."

This is utterly false. The current crisis was not only predictable, but predicted. The warnings of countless epidemiologists, along with the experience of most of the world in the preceding two years, were willfully ignored by Australian state, federal, and territory governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, who were determined to proceed with the profit-driven reopening, whatever the human cost.

The working class must now reject the murderous policies of big business and capitalist governments and fight for a socialist perspective, in which the health and lives of ordinary people are prioritised over the profit interests of a wealthy few.

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