

Australian medical official warns coronavirus could infect 1.5 million in NSW

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The Chief Medical Officer of New South Wales (NSW) warned on Thursday that as many as 1.5 million people in the state, Australia's most populous, are likely to be infected by the coronavirus pandemic that is sweeping the globe.

Dr Kerry Chant told a NSW Budget Estimates Committee that, on average, each infected person would probably transmit the virus to at least two others. She said that up to 20 percent of the population could contract the disease in the "first wave" of infections. "We are nowhere near the peak of this," she declared.

Chant's testimony demonstrates that millions of people are in danger. Based on the World Health Organisation's estimate that the global mortality rate of COVID-19 is 3.4 percent, Chant's prognosis signals that over 50,000 people could be killed in NSW alone.

The warning exposes the criminally negligent response of the federal Liberal-National Coalition government and state governments, both Coalition and Labor, across Australia. For six weeks they took no serious action to stem the spread of the virus, including by establishing mass testing facilities. Nothing of substance has been done to increase the capacity of the chronically over-stretched healthcare system.

The governments' attempts to cover-up the extent of the crisis were epitomised in a nationally-televised address on Thursday night by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. He sought to assuage what he described as the "anxieties of many people" by declaring that the country was "well-prepared" and "well-equipped" and that his government had an unspecified "plan" to tackle the virus.

In reality, reports are appearing every day showing that after decades of funding cuts, hospitals and medical facilities are incapable of dealing with the rapid spread of the virus.

Nationally, there are just 100 intensive care units (ICU) in the public hospital system, with an estimated 1,485

beds. In private hospitals, there are only 538 ICU beds.

With up to 15 percent of those infected with the virus likely to become seriously ill, Chant's prediction indicates that 225,000 people could require ICU beds in NSW alone over the coming months. ICU wards are already operating at maximum capacity, and bed shortages across the hospital system mean that ambulances are frequently forced to wait outside with patients, for hours on end.

Dr Simon Judkins, the former president of the Australian College of Emergency Medicine, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Thursday that, as a result, under-equipped doctors could be forced to make "tough decisions" about whom they treat.

"If there is a surge, it's a very tough situation," Judkins said. "Like any triage situation, you triage according to who is the most likely person to benefit from the intervention—the person who is most likely to survive."

Judkins added that as the virus spread, "someone you might intubate and put on a ventilator at the start of the outbreak, you might be in a different situation in two weeks' time."

In other words, doctors and medical professionals could be forced not to treat people who are on the brink of death.

This chilling prospect comes amid an ongoing failure of the state and federal governments to organise mass testing. The *Australian* reported this morning that a "potential shortfall in testing equipment" has "forced authorities to limit the number of tests, even as some health experts call for mass testing to tackle the arc of infection."

Low supplies of the chemicals required to conduct tests had led the Western Australian government to place strict criteria on testing. Individuals who have travelled overseas in the past 14 days and who may be at risk of carrying the virus will be required to present their

boarding pass and other travel documents before they are assessed.

The measure, clearly aimed at reducing the number of tests conducted, including of at-risk individuals, will undoubtedly hasten the spread of the virus.

This underscores the fraudulent character of the government's pledge last Tuesday to establish 100 "pop-up" testing clinics across the country. Late last week it was revealed that clinic sites had not been even selected. There is no clear indication when such clinics will exist.

On Thursday, it was reported that a promised fast-track testing system for General Practitioners with cold and flu symptoms still has not been rolled out. Doctors are therefore being forced to either call in sick, under conditions of a shortage of GPs, or to risk infecting their patients.

The woefully-inadequate government response is seeing a rapid spike in the number of infections. On Thursday afternoon, the number of confirmed cases nationally stood at 141. By Friday afternoon it had reached 200—an increase of 41 percent in 24 hours, the largest since the crisis began.

As of yesterday, there were 92 cases in NSW, 36 in Victoria, 35 in Queensland, 16 in South Australia, 14 in Western Australia, 5 in Tasmania, 1 in the Northern Territory and 1 in the Australian Capital Territory. At least one of the new NSW patients was a woman who had not travelled recently or knowingly come into contact with an infected individual, signalling person-to-person transmission within the community.

The extent of the crisis and the disarray of the official response were underscored by the announcement late Friday that Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton had tested positive and was isolated in a Queensland hospital.

Dutton had recently returned from a trip to the United States where he met with President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump and senior administration officials. He then attended an Australian cabinet meeting on Tuesday, at which Morrison and senior government ministers and health officials were present.

Despite this, Morrison and other ministers have refused to self-isolate or be tested.

Yesterday, the federal and state governments called for the cancellation of all events involving 500 or more people, but not until Monday. They took that step only after health experts publicly demanded it, and even then left the final cancellation decisions up to corporate event organisers.

Government and public sector workplaces will remain

open, as will schools and universities, even though many have larger concentrations of people than 500.

Morrison and Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese had previously vowed to attend football matches this weekend and declared that public gatherings should proceed. Whether or not Morrison and Albanese attend, the opening round of the National Rugby League is being played this weekend, potentially placing tens of thousands of spectators at risk.

The governments' reluctance to cancel mass events underscores the fact that its response is dictated solely by concerns about the impact on the profits of the major corporations. That was also seen in the government economic stimulus package unveiled on Wednesday, which provided for multi-billion dollar cash handouts and tax deductions for businesses and a pitiful one-off \$750 payment to welfare recipients and pensioners.

There are growing indications of popular anger, with thousands of people joining Facebook and other social media pages to discuss the spread of the virus and condemn the official response.

Today's editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper said the government was providing people with insufficient information. In a thinly-veiled warning of mass opposition, it stated: "Unless this changes, it will make adjusting to the new normal of scarcity, confusion, social isolation, idleness, frustration, fear, caring for the sick and grief even more difficult."

The political establishment has responded by closing ranks. The Labor state and territory governments have joined a special national cabinet, dubbed a "war cabinet" by the *Australian*, to be convened today. The measure harkens back to the coalition cabinets during the two world wars of last century.



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