

Australia unprepared for surge as coronavirus infections, fatalities mount

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Amid an exponential growth of COVID-19 infections across Australia, medical experts and health professionals have warned that the country is unprepared for an expected surge in case numbers and hospitalisations. Insufficient supplies of ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) for doctors and nurses, along with intensive care beds in hospitals, have been reported in virtually all states and territories.

As of this morning, the number of confirmed cases across the country stood at 2,613. The majority are in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, which has reported 1,219 infections. Another 466 have been confirmed in Victoria, 433 in Queensland, 205 in Western Australia, 197 in South Australia, 44 in the Australian Capital Territory, 34 in Tasmania and 5 in the Northern Territory.

Nationally, the rate of infection is doubling roughly every three days. Yesterday saw the highest number of new cases, with 212 in NSW alone, followed by 190 today. While the rise in new infections was slightly lower this morning than the previous day, fatalities grew by three. Victorian authorities announced another death this afternoon, bringing the national total since the pandemic began to 12.

The failure of federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, to "flatten the curve" of infections has led to predictions of a massive rise in the number of cases over the coming weeks. Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Q&A" program on Monday night, Dr Norman Swan stated that unless current trends are reversed, there will likely be some 45,000 confirmed cases in two weeks' time.

Referring to the sharp upward curve of new cases, which has been likened to a hockey stick, Swan bluntly stated: "If this hockey stick doesn't change that much, we'll be out of ICU [Intensive Care Unit] beds in New South Wales" within weeks, and "Victoria will be behind that, by April 10." Swan said "in that case ICU physicians will be faced with some very difficult decisions" as to who they treat and who they do not.

After decades of funding cuts, there are just 100 intensive care units in public hospitals, with an estimated 1,485 beds. There are another 538 ICU beds in the private healthcare system. Swan's prediction of 45,000 cases would indicate that at least 2,255 people would require treatment in intensive care units over the coming weeks, posing the prospect of the system

being completely overwhelmed.

As part of its criminally-negligent response to the crisis, the federal Coalition government has not outlined any concrete measures to boost the number of hospital beds. Instead, state authorities are carrying out a grossly inadequate scramble for additional beds and spaces, in hospitals that are already so under-resourced that ambulances are frequently compelled to wait outside for hours before a bed is available.

The Victorian government has announced that it will fund 269 new beds. However, some are at the decommissioned Baxter House Hospital in Geelong, meaning that substantial delays are likely. Underscoring the impact of the raft of hospital closures over the past decades, the South Australian government has also stated that it will partially recommission the ECH College Grove and Wakefield Hospitals, in a move that will only establish a total of 188 new beds.

In Canberra, the nation's capital, wards due for renovation are being used and there are preparations to expand intensive care units, including into what are currently operating theatres. In other words, staff are being forced to manufacture capacity in a system that is already stretched to breaking point.

There are also warnings of a shortage of ventilators, required to keep critically ill patients breathing. If the pandemic continues to spread, up to 50,000 may be required nationally. In Tasmania, for instance, there are only around 50 ventilators to cover a population of half a million.

The federal government has declared that it will boost the number of devices over the coming months. In an indication of the gutting of public medical manufacturing in Australia and the pro-business character of the government's response to the entire crisis, it has placed orders with a number of private operators. ResMed, one of the companies that have been commissioned, is producing just 1,000 new ventilators and it is unclear when they will be available.

The reality behind official assurances that there are enough of the devices was indicated by an urgent appeal issued by the Australian Veterinarian Board Council this week for all private and university vets to immediately register their ventilators.

The appeal indicates that there are preparations to use machines in public hospitals that have previously treated cats and dogs if there is a rapid surge. Veterinarians have noted that

it would be time-consuming and complex to repurpose the ventilators so that they were fit to treat humans.

There are already shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) at hospitals and doctor's surgeries across the country. The ABC yesterday cited warnings from the anonymous director of a company that provides supplies to 500 hospitals nationally. He said that "most hospitals" were just days away from running out of protective masks. Elective surgery is being cancelled due to lack of PPE.

One Brisbane general practitioner noted that she only had 100 non-reusable masks, despite seeing more than 150 patients per day. Another doctor in a south east Queensland hospital told the ABC that their workplace would run out of protective equipment in "probably about a week."

The doctor said: "A lot of the healthcare workers are getting to a point where they're saying, 'Well, we'll not work or we'll self-isolate and go away,' which will then crash the healthcare system."

Yesterday, four staff at the Werribee Emergency Department in Melbourne tested positive for COVID-19.

As the virus continues to spread, the refusal of federal and state authorities to put in place mass testing measures has come into starker focus. Last night, the national cabinet, composed of the federal government and state premiers, announced that it will expand testing by allowing examinations to be conducted on health workers, nursing home staff and individuals in "high risk zones" with a fever and flu symptoms.

Extraordinarily, workers in these industries have previously been refused tests unless they were able to prove that they have recently returned from overseas or have come into contact with a confirmed case. Other workers, who do not meet those criteria but who have symptoms, will still not be tested.

Indicating that there are not enough test kits, federal health authorities have directed universities to fossick around their campuses for materials that could be used to manufacture them.

This is one aspect of the inadequate official response, which has included a refusal to implement lockdown measures demanded by medical experts. The federal government announced on Sunday that non-essential businesses would be directed to close, but shopping centres, hairdressers and a number of other industries are exempt.

Schools remain partially or completely open in most states.

In Queensland, the state Labor government rejected calls for any reduction in school operations throughout the week, despite warnings from its own chief medical officer that the decision places the health of teachers over the age of 60 in jeopardy. Only today did Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk make a confusing statement that schools will move to become "pupil free," while remaining open for the children of workers in "essential industries."

The Victorian Labor government has brought forward school holidays, but forced teachers to continue to conduct their duties. The Liberal government in New South Wales announced that

schools would not close but that parents should consider keeping their children at home.

Yesterday, Raina MacIntyre from the University of NSW's Biosecurity Program revealed that the federal government had rejected the majority opinion of its own panel of university experts, which encouraged it to implement an immediate lockdown.

MacIntyre told the ABC: "I was hoping we'd see a more comprehensive lockdown for a short period of time, but that is not the approach we're taking. It's more a trickle sort of approach, a little bit by bit, which won't be as effective at stopping the transmission in the community."

Meanwhile, the Australian Academy of Science issued a statement yesterday demanding that the federal government "publish the scientific evidence that is supporting its decisions so the scientific know-how of the nation can be brought to bear."

The refusal to implement a lockdown by state and federal governments is driven solely by concerns over corporate profits. This has been demonstrated by the massive cash handouts made to big business over the past week, while hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs and been forced to queue outside Centrelink offices to claim a meagre welfare benefit.

Thousands of new job losses are being announced each day. This morning, fashion retail corporation Premier shut down all its stores, such as Just Jeans, Dotti, Portmans and Smiggle, until at least April 21. A press release bluntly declared that the company's 9,000 employees "will not attend work and will not be paid." On Wednesday Virgin Australia stood down 8,000 people from its 10,000-strong workforce. Today, the company revealed that more than 1,000 of those workers, including all the pilots at its budget arm Tigerair, would lose their jobs permanently.



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