

Australia: Fifth resident dies at Sydney aged care home

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An outbreak of COVID-19 at an aged care facility in western Sydney has now claimed the lives of five residents.

There are 44 confirmed cases of coronavirus at Newmarch House in Caddens, near Penrith, including 15 staff. More than a quarter of the residents at the facility have now tested positive.

The outbreak is believed to have originated with a staff member who worked six days in a row at the facility before testing positive for COVID-19. The worker, juggling two part-time jobs to make ends meet, had experienced a “scratchy throat” for several days, but believed it was just a symptom of fatigue.

At the time of the worker’s last shift at Newmarch House, healthcare workers were still only tested for coronavirus if they had travelled overseas, had close contact with a known confirmed case or were experiencing both fever and acute respiratory symptoms.

The worker was eventually tested for the coronavirus only after being informed that she had been in contact with a confirmed case unrelated to Newmarch House.

Investigation of the outbreak has been carried out by police, suggesting that the interest of the state is in laying blame, rather than in conducting an objective analysis that could further the so-far limited understanding of how this new virus spreads.

After visiting the nursing home and interviewing the worker, police declared that there was no reckless intent, she had not showed symptoms at work and no further action would be taken against her.

Nevertheless, New South Wales (NSW) Health Minister Brad Hazzard refused to retract his earlier statement that the employee was “not doing the right thing” by continuing to show up for work.

Newmarch House is not the first nursing home in

NSW to have suffered a wave of COVID-19 infections. An outbreak at Dorothy Henderson Lodge, in the Sydney suburb of Macquarie Park, claimed six lives between March 3 and April 6.

On April 2, more than a week prior to the discovery of coronavirus at Newmarch House, there were at least 17 nursing homes with confirmed cases across Australia.

Almost all nursing home residents are in multiple high-risk categories for COVID-19. International experience has shown that elderly people, especially those with underlying health problems, are most likely to succumb to the disease. Social distancing inside the facilities is often not possible, as many residents require physical assistance with movement, and those suffering from dementia cannot be expected to adhere to the guidelines.

Although the risk of COVID-19 outbreaks in aged-care has long been known, personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers is still in short supply. Federal Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck told 2GB radio on Wednesday—eleven days after the NSW Public Health unit was advised of the outbreak—that he was “fast-tracking” PPE for workers at Newmarch House.

As a result of the lack of protection, more than 50 workers who have had close contact with infected residents or staff are now in self-isolation. Others have refused to work at the nursing home, according to Colbeck: “A lot of people get really concerned about going into the facility, that becomes an issue because people obviously don’t want to catch the virus.”

In an April 20 letter to Newmarch House residents and their families, Anglicare chief executive Grant Millard said: “Our greatest challenge remains the supply to our home of skilled registered nurses and carers. For this reason, we may not be able to make all

our calls tomorrow.”

The reality is, long before the current crisis, the relentless drive for profit had made under-staffing a standard practice in the multi-billion dollar aged care industry. Budget-cutting measures led to the replacement of highly-skilled medical staff with “personal carers” earning around \$21.50 per hour. Between 2003 and 2019, the percentage of aged care workers who were registered nurses decreased by almost one third.

Some Newmarch House residents and their families have alleged that the shortage of staff has led to long waits for meals, medication, and emergency assistance. A group of residents’ relatives gathered outside the facility on Wednesday to protest the poor standard of care.

One of the protesters told the *Daily Telegraph* that his 76-year-old mother, diagnosed with COVID-19, waited two hours for assistance after falling in the bath and pressing her panic buzzer.

Another demonstrator told reporters: “Mum won’t die of coronavirus, she’ll die due to a lack of care.”

Family members’ concerns are heightened because Newmarch House, and all other Anglicare aged care facilities, have been closed to visitors since March 23. Many of the other large aged care providers have had total lockdowns in place for even longer.

The total ban on visitors exists despite specific exemptions to social distancing rules to allow people to visit and take care of elderly relatives, and a recommendation from the federal government allowing aged care residents one visit, by up to two people, per day.

Random quality and safety inspections ceased on March 17, meaning there is also no oversight of conditions inside aged care facilities by health authorities until they are notified of a COVID-19 outbreak.

Rather than taking proper measures to ensure the safety of regular workers, the government has engaged a private contractor, Aspen Medical, to take over Newmarch House and other aged care facilities where outbreaks occur.

Aspen Medical deals mostly with the military, providing health services on all Australian Defence Force bases, training soldiers in battlefield first aid and building mobile hospitals for remote deployments.

Aspen Medical was hired by the Australian Border Force to report on the medical condition of more than 1,000 crew members kept in isolation on the Ruby Princess for more than four weeks. Although the workers were confined to their cabins, infection continued to spread under the company’s supervision, possibly because meals were still being prepared in the ship’s galley throughout most of the quarantine.

Among many other contracts handed to Aspen Medical during the pandemic, the company was also chosen to build a “pop-up” COVID-19 emergency department near Canberra Hospital. According to Australian Capital Territory Health Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith, “a tender process would have slowed it down and we would still end up with [Aspen Medical] who knows how to get this stuff done.”

A decrease in the number of new confirmed cases over recent days is being used to justify government moves to ease lockdown measures and force a return to work. Social distancing measures, it is claimed, have been so successful that they will soon be unnecessary, although there is no vaccine, no treatment, and less than two percent of the population has been tested.

COVID-19 clusters such as Newmarch House and other aged care facilities, in northwest Tasmania and on board the Ruby Princess, are a stark illustration of how rapidly infection can spread from one or two individuals to an entire community.



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