

Australia: Hundreds of health workers in Victoria contract COVID-19

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As the active coronavirus cases in the state of Victoria surge past 2,000—the highest level yet in Australia—a growing number of nurses, doctors, aged care workers, paramedics and their patients in the state are testing positive for COVID-19.

Health workers are raising concerns about personal protection equipment (PPE) shortages, rationing of PPE and inadequate infection control measures in their workplaces.

This morning, after days of cover-up by the state Labor government in the face of increasing reports of clusters in multiple hospitals and aged care facilities, Victorian Health authorities revealed that 405 healthcare workers had been infected with coronavirus—11 in the previous 24 hours—and 150 of which were active cases.

Still, the department did not outline where all the cases were. The true level may be higher. Up to 800 healthcare workers have either been diagnosed with the illness or are in isolation as a close contact, according to one union source reported by Nine Media outlets.

Recent infections include at least five staff members at Monash Health, Victoria's largest public health service, where 77 are now in precautionary quarantine, five at the Royal Children's Hospital and six at the Royal Women's Hospital.

Last week, the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne confirmed that eight of its staff had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Of these confirmed cases, a spokesperson said three had been self-isolating as close contacts of colleagues who had previously tested positive. This is the hospital's second outbreak since the pandemic began—three cancer patients died in March after contracting COVID-19 at the Alfred and a further 10 staff and five patients were infected.

Pictures have since emerged of overflowing bins

containing contaminated masks, gowns and gloves at the Alfred Hospital. An anonymous healthcare worker told the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* that staff are concerned about infection control and “I had to touch the bin lid with my hands to get PPE off, it's disgusting and dangerous.”

A nurse from Northern Hospital in suburban Epping told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that P2/N95 masks and disposable gowns were being rationed and “had to be requested by the nurse in charge.” Another health worker said management was telling staff to hand in any unused masks and that they would have to request them.

At Northern Health, which includes Northern Hospital and Broadmeadows Hospital, 21 staff have tested positive for coronavirus over the past two weeks and a further 142 staff are in self-isolation, which includes about 40 percent of its emergency staff according to the ABC.

At Western Health's Sunshine Hospital emergency department, two healthcare workers tested positive last Wednesday. One week earlier, another staff member tested positive, forcing two patients and 16 staff members into home isolation.

Last week, 12 staff from the Royal Melbourne Hospital and 48 inpatients tested positive, sending at least 70 staff into self-isolation. A hospital spokesperson said two nurses with COVID-19 had attended the hospitals' electronic medical record training, which has two-hour long, face-to-face sessions. One anonymous doctor told the ABC that staff members were beginning to boycott the training due to the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Coronavirus cases have increased sharply in Victoria over the past month, but the state Labor government only last week advised metropolitan Melbourne health

services staff to adopt basic Tier 1 PPE precautions in “public facing areas, particularly where adequate social distancing is not possible.” Tier 1 PPE consists of a surgical mask and eye protection, usually a face-shield.

Residential aged care facilities too have suffered a surge in cases among workers and residents. At least 10 different facilities have had staff been diagnosed with COVID-19. The largest clusters are at Menarock Aged Care in Essendon, with 38 recorded cases, and Glendale Aged Care, which has 23 cases. A 90-year-old resident, Alf Jordan, died just three days after testing positive.

Aged care homes are a major source of infections due to inadequate protective equipment, testing and staffing levels. In April, Newmarch House in Sydney suffered a wave of infections and 19 residents died after government health officials refused to allow infected residents to be treated in hospital. An earlier outbreak in Sydney at Dorothy Henderson Lodge infected 13 residents and five staff, and claimed six lives.

Four new cases of COVID-19 have been reported among paramedics in Victoria. Victoria Ambulance is yet to confirm whether these cases are linked, but said two of the paramedics were in close contact.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, reports and studies have highlighted PPE shortages among health workers. Around the world, thousands of healthcare workers have been infected and hundreds have died from the disease.

In April, an Edith Cowan University survey found that around half of doctors, nurses and paramedics had no access to adequate and safe levels of PPE. Nearly 70 percent of participants said they had been asked to ration PPE and around 30 percent said they knew colleagues who had to resort to “using non-traditional or non-vetted forms of PPE.”

A more recent Australia-wide survey of 500 healthcare workers found that half were still experiencing PPE shortages. Furthermore, it found that, in some cases, only low-quality masks were available for workers in aged care and disability services, and that some were having to source their own PPE.

These studies highlight how unprepared Australia’s health services remain for the rapid rise in coronavirus cases. After the bipartisan national cabinet began lifting limited safety restrictions in April, claiming to have “flattened the curve,” orders for ventilators and defibrillators were cancelled or reduced. Plans to build

a 750-bed intensive care unit (ICU) facility at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre were shelved.

Only last Monday did Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s federal government announce that five million masks would be released from a government stockpile, with one million going to primary health care workers and four million to aged care services.

Victorian Health Minister Jenny Mikakos announced on Thursday that all category three elective surgeries would be suspended across Melbourne’s public hospitals. Mikakos said elective surgery capacity would be cut by 50 percent to free up beds for coronavirus patients. Private hospitals are to pause elective surgeries at 75 percent capacity.

Mikakos told reporters: “We have created more ICU capacity, more beds in our hospital system, and we have undertaken extensive training of our staff.” But she provided no direct response to a question about the current surge capacity, that is, the ability of hospitals to rapidly mobilise staff to meet a sudden increased demand.

For decades, both Labor and Liberal-National governments at a state and federal level have cut and privatised health services, leaving hospitals unequipped to deal with a pandemic. Moreover, the premature lifting of lockdown restrictions by the state Labor government, in line with the Morrison government’s push to “reopen the economy” at the risk of workers’ lives, has facilitated the spread of the virus to health workers.



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