

Australia: Victorian hospital admissions soar amid warnings COVID-19 surge will continue for weeks

Oscar Grenfell
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As “stage four” lockdown measures and workplace closures go into effect in Melbourne, the state of Victoria yesterday recorded its highest tally of coronavirus deaths and infections, with 725 confirmed new cases and 15 fatalities. A further 471 infections were reported today.

Of Wednesday’s 15 victims, at least 12 were linked to aged-care homes, with around 100 such facilities in Melbourne being centres of active infection. One of those who died, however, was in his 30s, tragically demonstrating the falsehood of claims that younger people are not at serious risk.

Many more deaths are anticipated, as hospitalisation rates soar, especially in Melbourne. On Tuesday, there were 456 Victorians in hospital as a result of complications from COVID-19, 35 of them in intensive care units (ICU).

Some 24 hours later, those figures had risen to 538 hospital patients, with 42 in ICU. This was the sharpest spike in hospital admissions since the pandemic began. A month ago, there were fewer than 25 COVID-19 hospital patients in all of Victoria. Graphs of hospitalisations show an exponential growth.

The increase has sparked renewed warnings from doctors and medical experts that Victoria’s entire hospital system could be overwhelmed. Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) “7:30” program last night, Dr Sarah Whitelaw, an emergency consultant at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, stated that hospital capacity would be exceeded within weeks if new infection tallies did not begin to fall.

Whitelaw commented: “We thought at the beginning of the pandemic that our problem was going to be intensive care beds and the number of ventilators that we had... we’ve all been blindsided by the fact that our problem is the workforce. I think the number of healthcare worker infections is a real concern.”

Earlier this week, it was revealed that there are more than 700 active cases among Victorian healthcare workers,

including hospital doctors and nurses. That accounts for some 10 percent of all active infections, and recalls the situation in the most heavily affected regions of Italy and in New York, when they were struck by the worst of the pandemic.

Whitelaw and other doctors have noted that a substantial portion of the rise in admissions stems from the transfer of infected aged-care residents to public hospitals. For weeks, Victorian and federal authorities resisted calls from relatives for all sick aged-care patients to receive hospital-quality treatment.

As daily fatalities have risen, however, it has become clear that aged-care homes are becoming killing fields, and that there will be a large number of casualties if a substantial number of residents are not immediately provided with expert care. Low-paid casual staff have been denied the necessary training to deal with an unprecedented public health emergency, while no precautions were put in place throughout the sector for a major outbreak of a communicable disease.

This is a glaring indictment of Labor and Liberal-National governments, which have overseen the transformation of the sector into a fully-corporatised one that provides substantial profits to private owners.

The extent of the criminality was pointed to by a report in the *Herald Sun* yesterday, revealing that an unnamed Melbourne aged-care operator told staff members that it was impossible for them to contract the coronavirus on the job.

This was one day after federal aged care minister Richard Colbeck told a Senate committee hearing that he would be “reluctant” to release a public list of all facilities hit by COVID-19 outbreaks. Colbeck declared that some operators could not “handle a big media influx,” and warned that revealing them would result in “reputational issues.” In other words, it would affect their profit margins.

The intense strains on the healthcare system are also the result of decades of funding cuts, which have been

intensified by the failure of state and federal authorities to boost spending in the sector, as they promised when they began the pro-business lifting of lockdown measures in May.

The expansion of the pandemic is directly related to the breakdown of contact-tracing, with the majority of new cases each day being reported as “under investigation,” meaning the source of infection has not been confirmed. There are well over 700 “mystery infections,” where the circumstances of transmission are completely unknown.

When the pandemic began, the Victorian public health team responsible for tracing communicable diseases had just 14 staff members, fewer than a football team. Over the following months, thousands of untrained individuals were recruited, including redundant call centre employees and military personnel.

Yesterday, Nine Media revealed that even these superficial measures were wound back in May and June, coinciding with the back-to-work campaign of the state and federal governments. Nine stated that “sources very close to the operation” said that the decision was “catastrophic,” coming just weeks before major clusters exploded in quarantine hotels. The source stated that the authorities had relied on businesses to self-report cases and investigate them.

The consequence of these criminal decisions has been hundreds of workers contracting a potentially-deadly virus.

The ABC reported this morning that employees at the Australian Lamb Company meatworks in Colac, a regional Victoria town, waited between five and ten days for their COVID-19 test results, after the virus began circulating in the plant. Contact-tracing took even longer. The outbreak has since led to almost 90 infections.

Most explosively, the ABC cited a letter, allegedly from the Victorian deputy chief medical officer, instructing an infected worker to return to the job, despite the fact that he was only ten days through the mandated 14-day quarantine period.

The extraordinary correspondence demonstrates that while they have been presiding over a disaster in the healthcare system, Victorian authorities have been actively campaigning on behalf of big business to suppress concerns among workers and ensure that there is no disruption to lucrative corporate operations.

The prospects of a full-scale collapse of Melbourne hospitals have been underscored by modelling, indicating that infections will continue to grow under the new lockdown, for weeks or months.

Secret state government estimates, revealed by the *Australian* this morning, show that daily cases are predicted to increase to as many as 1,100 by the end of next week, and will remain over 1,000 for eight days. The figures indicate

that infections will not decline until late August, and will continue to trend at greater than 300 per day, until mid-September, when the current measures are set to end. This will mean hundreds or thousands more people requiring hospital treatment.

The record demonstrates that the Victorian Labor government, acting in line with the homicidal back-to-work campaign supported by the entire political establishment, only introduced the new restrictions after it was clear that the state was on the precipice of a catastrophe unprecedented outside of wartime.

For weeks, Labor Premier Daniel Andrews, with the support of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, rejected calls for the closure of workplaces and schools, due to the impact that this would have on corporate profits.

The “stage four” lockdown measures announced on Sunday involve substantial retail closures in Melbourne, along with the shutdown of some manufacturing, and reduced operations for other sections. The cost will be borne by the 250,000 more workers who are being sacked or stood-down, the hundreds of thousands more who are already unemployed and those who do not receive enough shifts to make ends meet.

Construction bosses, who have been given an exemption because their activities are crucial to the fortunes of the ultra-wealthy, have already begun lobbying for a further easing of any restrictions.

Meanwhile, “stage three” measures, involving retail closures and sharp restrictions on movement are coming into effect today in regional Victoria, where infections continue to mount.

Double-digit cases are continuing to be reported every day in New South Wales (NSW), the country’s most populous state, with epidemiologists giving 50-50 odds of a major surge like that in Victoria. The NSW Liberal government has declared that it will not return to even limited lockdown measures, following the same pro-business playbook that has led to the disaster in Victoria.



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