

Dangerous conditions in Melbourne quarantine hotels helped cause Australia's COVID-19 resurgence

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A board of inquiry commissioned by Victoria's state Labor Party government on July 2 has yet to begin hearings on Melbourne's COVID-19 quarantine hotels, which will focus on the failed use of private security contractors to maintain the isolation of returned international travellers.

Former Family Court judge Jennifer Coate, who is heading the inquiry, announced this week that her report would be delayed by six weeks because of the lockdown imposed by the government as part of its "state of disaster" declaration last weekend.

In the meantime, Premier Daniel Andrews and his ministers are refusing to answer questions about the quarantine breakdown at the state capital's hotels, falsely claiming it would be inappropriate to do so while the inquiry was afoot.

The surge in coronavirus infections in Victoria has seen the state rapidly shift from an average of around 8 cases per day between mid-April and mid-June to now averaging more than 500 per day. The state's death toll has risen since early June from less than 30 to above 170.

The escape of infections from the quarantine hotels in late May was disastrous. It combined with a lack of widespread testing that disguised the prevalence of carriers with mild or no symptoms. This created the conditions for an inevitable increase with the premature reopening of the state's schools and workplaces from that month.

On May 27, Victorian health authorities reported that a worker at Rydges on Swanston, one of 12 quarantine hotels in Melbourne, had tested positive for COVID-19.

Since then, at least 60 quarantine hotel workers and their close contacts have contracted the coronavirus. Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton stated in mid-July that many, possibly all, the subsequent cases in

Victoria had initially stemmed from the hotel outbreaks.

Genomic testing has since shown a link between the Victorian cases and a major New South Wales outbreak, at the Crossroads Hotel in the Sydney suburb of Casula.

With more than 150 COVID-19 deaths recorded in Victoria since the beginning of June, the hotel quarantine affair has overtaken the Ruby Princess cruise ship as the most deadly example of the Australian ruling elite's catastrophic profit-driven handling of the pandemic.

Returned travellers have voiced concerns over conditions in the hotels. Ricky Singh and Kate Hislop told the Nine Network's "60 Minutes" they were not tested for COVID-19 at any point during their two-week quarantine.

Others reported that after they complained of dirty carpets, they were provided with a vacuum cleaner that was passed from room to room without being disinfected, and that bed linens were not fully changed between guests.

Hotel "guests" did not receive the promised mental health counselling to assist with the stress of confinement, anxiety about the pandemic, and trauma from their difficult journeys home. Security guards and hotel staff were unqualified and ill-prepared to cope with the fragile mental state of those desperate to get outside for fresh air, a taste of freedom, or a cigarette.

The Victorian government entrusted the confinement of returned travellers in quarantine hotels to three private security firms, MSS, Unified Security and Wilson Security. While these companies received around \$70 per hour per guard under the contracts, the guards themselves were paid as little as \$18 per hour, less than the award rate of around \$28 for casual workers.

The three companies engaged subcontractors to provide additional guards, and these businesses then turned to

recruitment consultants who trawled online classifieds and social media to find the cheapest available labour.

This multi-tiered subcontracting has become a common practice in the security industry, and many other sectors, over the past four decades. It is frequently linked to underpayment of workers and contravention of regulations.

A 2018 Fair Work Ombudsman report into local government security contracting found that 63 percent of subcontractors failed to comply with federal workplace laws, higher than the already alarming 42 percent of principal contractors. Most breaches were for underpayment, either through sub-minimum hourly rates or failure to pay overtime and penalty rates.

As result of the poor pay, availability of work at all hours, and minimal training requirements, the industry is dominated by students, recent migrants or workers forced to seek a second job to make ends meet. Around 47 percent of security guards are employed as casuals. The poor conditions of these workers likely contributed to the spread of the virus, as many live in close quarters with large intergenerational families or in share houses.

An anonymous student, “John,” who worked as a hotel quarantine guard, told “60 Minutes” that on his first day of work, he was told to ask another security worker what his duties were. The other guard, who had also started work that day, told him: “If someone comes out of the room, we just have to tell them ‘don’t come out of the room.’”

Not only were security officers not provided with personal protective equipment (PPE), they were explicitly advised not to use it. “John” said: “Everyone was sitting there without PPE because they told us not to wear any masks.”

This was in accordance with guidance from the Victorian government that it was not necessary for guards to wear masks unless it was impossible to maintain 1.5-metre social distancing.

Another young hotel quarantine worker, Shayla Shakshi, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “7:30” program that while she was provided with a mask and gloves on her first day, she was instructed to bring her own in future.

Shakshi continued: “We didn’t get any training when I got there. We just had to put a mask on, put gloves on and that’s it.”

Alarmed by the lax safety measures, Shakshi decided after a single day not to return to the Stamford Plaza hotel, where at least 43 workers and close contacts would

later test positive for COVID-19.

“John,” however, continued in the role, eventually working at six quarantine hotels, including the Rydges on Swanston, where more than 20 workers and close contacts became infected with the coronavirus.

Many guards worked at multiple hotels, significantly increasing the risk that they would contract and spread the virus. Some worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, probably causing fatigue and poor judgment. These dangers were compounded by a campaign by governments and the corporate media to downplay the severity of the pandemic in order to minimise the impact on business profits.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the same governments and media have blamed individuals for the spread of the coronavirus. The news coverage has fixated on salacious, and probably baseless, allegations of sexual activity between guards and hotel “guests.”

Premier Andrews claimed: “There are a number of staff who, despite knowing about infection control protocols, have decided to make a number of errors.”

As well as demonising poorly-paid workers, these slanders fed into media-promoted demands for the military to be mobilised to enforce quarantine and movement restrictions, as well as hundreds of police.

The reality is that the security and hotel workers were untrained and ill-equipped to handle one of the most important and challenging jobs of the pandemic.

The public health crisis demands a response carried out by trained health professionals with the best available medical and protective equipment. The failure of Australia’s governments, state and federal, Liberal-National and Labor, to implement such a response will result in hundreds, if not thousands, of needless infections and deaths.



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