Australia: Residents left to die as COVID-19 sweeps through Victorian aged care facilities

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14 August 2020

As COVID-19 continues to spread rapidly through aged care facilities in Victoria, reports have emerged of infected residents being denied hospitalisation and left to die in homes that are understaffed and unequipped to treat coronavirus patients.

At least 198 COVID-19 deaths in Australia have been in aged care homes, accounting for well over half the total. With 1,929 active cases amongst residents and staff, further tragic losses are anticipated. Inadequate personal protective equipment [PPE], infection control measures and staffing levels have created the conditions for the highly contagious virus to sweep through the facilities.

Now, an article by the *Australian* has alleged that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is turning away "frail, elderly COVID-positive patients" from hospitals. Citing an anonymous senior federal official, the paper said DHHS said it did not have enough hospital beds for "those type of people at this point in time."

Dr Robert Hoffman told the *Australian* that at Glenlyn Aged Care Facility, the Royal Melbourne Hospital had originally arranged to transfer patients at risk of "wandering" and infecting others to hospital, but then cancelled these plans. Instead, Dr Hoffman said, "Any COVID residents who were unwell were ordered as needed palliative care medications, morphine etc., one [resident was] as young as 46." Some 15 patients and five staff have tested positive at the facility.

Raquel Silvera, whose husband is in Glenlyn Aged Care Facility, said she found out that her husband had COVID-19 on Friday last week and that he was being sedated using Risperidone, an antipsychotic, without her permission.

The use of chemical sedation in aged care was already widespread prior to the pandemic. A submission to the ongoing Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety last year revealed more than half (61 percent) of aged care residents were taking psychotropic agents regularly, the most common of these being antidepressants.

Another submission stated that up to 80 percent of dementia patients are taking some form of psychotropic drug. One witness told the royal commission that chemical restraints were used "because there are not enough staff" to manage residents, particularly those with high care needs.

Some 123 nursing homes have seen outbreaks of Covid-19 since May, when governments began lifting lockdown restrictions in line with the demands of big business to "reopen the economy."

The federal health department, which is responsible for overseeing most of the facilities, has refused to release a list of aged care centres where outbreaks have occurred. Health department secretary Brendan Murphy stated that this is because the lucrative corporations that own the homes are "worried about reputational issues," i.e., their profit margins.

Families of aged care residents have reported not being told when their loved ones tested positive for COVID-19 and receiving little to no communication about their condition.

Ivan Ruskavina, whose mother died after contracting coronavirus at St Basil's Home for the Aged, told the *Herald Sun* that after his mother Marija tested positive for COVID-19, he spent days calling hospitals to find out where she was after the aged care facility was not able to tell him. He stated: "All authorities are to blame… you've got Aged Care Victoria, the federal and state governments and the whole medical industry… We've been let down, it's as simple as that."

All employees at St Basil's were placed in quarantine on July 22, two weeks after the first cases were recorded. It was not until July 31 that remaining residents were evacuated to hospital after staff from the small "surge" team, arranged to replace quarantined workers, also began testing positive. One source told the *Herald Sun* that when residents were evacuated, many were "dehydrated and malnourished." There have been at least 174 infections and 20 deaths at the facility.

So far only two aged care homes are reported to have entirely evacuated residents due to coronavirus clusters.

Other major outbreaks at aged care facilities in Victoria include 193 cases at Epping Gardens Aged Care, 147 cases at Estia Aged Care Facility in Ardeer and 127 cases at Kirkbrae Aged Care Home in Kilsynth. Although the exact number of deaths in particular facilities has not been made public, media photos have shown the bodies of deceased residents being removed from St Basil's and Epping Gardens facilities.

Most of the facilities where outbreaks have occurred are privately owned.

The extensive corporatisation of aged care and cuts to funding for public health has been carried out over decades under consecutive Labor and Liberal governments, facilitated by the trade unions. Just nine percent of aged care services in Australia are currently managed by government organisations.

Moreover, in the months since the initial outbreak of the pandemic, no significant measures have been taken to bolster the healthcare system in preparation for an influx of coronavirus patients. Frontline health workers continue to report inadequate PPE and hospitals are understaffed, as hundreds of workers in the sector test positive for coronavirus.

Surgical masks were only made compulsory for aged care staff in lockdown zones on July 13, two days after the first recorded deaths of aged care residents in Victoria and the number of infections in the state had already climbed to 250. It was not until July 28 that the most limited PPE, face masks, were made compulsory for all aged care staff.

In a recent survey of aged care workers conducted by the Australian Nurses and Midwives Federation (ANMF), nearly half of the respondents said that they did not have appropriate access to PPE. An additional 19 percent were unsure. A quarter of participants reported that they had not received recent information or training regarding the correct use of PPE and 28 said that their employer had not provided them with a reviewed or updated plan regarding COVID-19.

A further 76 percent of participants reported that nursing and care staff had not increased during the COVID-19 period. In fact, over half of those surveyed reported staff cuts since the beginning of March and said that kitchen and cleaning staff had not increased during the pandemic.

Ninety-two percent of participants also indicated that any additional aged care funding for the pandemic was not discussed with them. One worker commented: "We are unaware where the funding is going and what the funding is for. But we see no evident changes in our day to day [situation], in most cases it seems they are cutting more costs."

The deep crisis in aged care and the denial of medical treatment to those most vulnerable to the pandemic is an indication of the ruling elite's callous disregard for human life. The cost-cutting, budget-driven framework of the aged care industry, which generates revenues of $22 billion each year, comes at the expense of the health, safety and lives of aged care workers and residents.

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