

Australia: Sharp increase in COVID-19 among Victorian healthcare workers

Margaret Rees
21 August 2020

The number of healthcare workers infected with COVID-19 in the Australian state of Victoria has doubled in the past 20 days and is now at 2,563, with 753 active cases.

The figures, which were released yesterday by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), have prompted alarm from overworked nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers over inadequate protection and contact tracing.

On Wednesday night, a major COVID-19 cluster was reported among healthcare workers at Frankston Hospital, a leading facility in Melbourne's southeast, where infections in the surrounding community are growing rapidly.

Peninsula Health, an umbrella group that operates the hospital, admitted that 40 nursing staff, four doctors, five support staff and two allied health employees had tested positive. According to the *Age* newspaper, there are another 90 Peninsula Health employees in isolation.

An email from Monash Health chief Andrew Stripp sent to workers on August 18 warned medical staff who had worked at Peninsula Health between August 3 and August 17 that they were at risk of testing positive and directed them to stay home.

On August 11, Victorian Health Minister Jenny Mikakos told a parliamentary committee that "it was difficult to be precise about the source of infection" among healthcare workers but claimed that "10 to 15 percent of those cases have been acquired in the workplace." The next day, Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews insisted "the majority of healthcare workers are acquiring coronavirus outside of the workplace."

Mikakos's assertions have been rejected by healthcare academics and professionals. Julian Rait,

Victorian president of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), told the media that that the Frankston Hospital cluster could swell beyond 50 healthcare workers. "How this has happened needs to be thoroughly investigated," he said.

Rait warned there may be infected medical staff at other health services in the city's southeast, including Monash Health and the Golf Links Road Rehabilitation Centre. Rait has written to Health Minister Mikakos asking for a breakdown of healthcare infections and details about PPE at Peninsula Health facilities.

Last week, Rait denounced Australian governments over their responses to the increasing infection rates amongst healthcare employees, stating: "AMA Victoria is extremely concerned by the rising prevalence of infection among healthcare workers, which would appear to exceed that of the wider community."

"Quite simply, the failure of various governments to properly record and analyse infections among healthcare workers is scandalous, as we are likely underestimating the true scale of the problem and are putting staff at higher risk."

Victorian government reportage of the figures lacks transparency. State health authorities have not released a comprehensive breakdown of how many doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers have tested positive, how and where they contracted the virus and how many have been in hospital and intensive care.

The Labor government and Peninsula Health, for example, have provided little detail about the Frankston Hospital cluster, even though the DHHS has admitted that that an Incident Management Team had been sent to Peninsula Health.

The DHHS website currently reports 148 coronavirus cases linked to the Royal Melbourne Hospital Royal Park Campus but does not indicate the staff/patient

breakdown, nor provide recent information about the outbreak.

Earlier this month, the DHHS listed some cases linked to Werribee Mercy Hospital (four) and Eastern Health (four cases in staff linked to a hospital ward) as well as Ballarat Health Service (two cases).

The danger of healthcare workers becoming infected is exacerbated by the movement of staff between facilities as the state government scrambles to provide qualified staff to COVID-19 hotspots or into contact tracing. An ICU nurse at a major Melbourne teaching hospital, for example, is also working as a casual contact tracer, hired through Medibank.

Yesterday, Knox Private Hospital, in Melbourne's outer east, said four of its staff were infected. Some of Knox's nurses had been deployed to the locked-down Flemington public housing towers last month, after a public outcry that it was being treated as a police and not a healthcare operation. Nearby Holmesglen Private Hospital has three confirmed cases among staff. A spokesman for Healthscope, which runs both hospitals, said all infected staff had been working in COVID-19 wards.

A Melbourne doctor who spoke anonymously to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) yesterday said a surgical nurse had contracted COVID-19 while working a "93-hour week." The nurse "tested positive in my ward," the doctor said, "and infected at least two patients and as many as 10 medical staff."

According to the *Guardian*, an email written by Professor Andrew Wilson, the chief medical officer for Victoria, stated that 1,835 healthcare workers had been infected by August 8. Of those, 50 had definitely acquired the virus in a healthcare setting—this included 12 doctors, 29 nurses and nine others such as paramedics and allied health workers. Of the rest, "healthcare acquisition remains under investigation for 1,598 healthcare workers."

Other limited data from the DHHS indicated that nurses accounted for at least 42 percent of the cases among healthcare workers. Just over 50 percent were "other healthcare" workers—including pharmacists, paramedics, other allied health professionals and disability workers. A number of doctors have spent time as patients in ICUs, including one doctor aged only in his 30s.

The Pharmacist Guild has expressed alarm at the

COVID-19 cases among their members. President Anthony Tassone said that although hospital pharmacists are deemed essential workers and can get their test results prioritised, community pharmacists are not.

University of Wollongong occupational hygienist Jane Whitelaw told the ABC yesterday that infection rates among healthcare workers were double that of the rest of the population.

"At least 50 percent of Victorian healthcare workers contracted COVID-19 in their workplace. That would be a conservative estimate," she said.

"If you had twice the risk of getting something in your workplace than you did in the general community, everybody would be up in arms," she added.

"It's not good enough to accept there's a risk there to healthcare workers and we're not doing everything that we can to protect them. Healthcare workers are being treated differently to other workers."

Government unwillingness to reveal the number of healthcare infections related to specific workplaces is bound up with the whole track record of the Andrews Labor government and the national cabinet led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. In line with big business demands, Australian governments are pressing ahead with premature reopening of the economy, with frontline health workers being sacrificed for profit.



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