

# Infectious UK coronavirus variant spreads from quarantine hotel in Western Australia

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Events in Western Australia (WA) this week show how quickly the global COVID-19 pandemic can spread because of inadequate government quarantine facilities and other basic safety measures.

On Sunday, the WA Labor Party state government revealed that a young security guard in the capital, Perth, who worked in a quarantine hotel for overseas travellers, had tested positive for the coronavirus, marking the first locally acquired case in the state in almost 10 months.

The government later confirmed that the guard had contracted the UK variant of the virus, which is up to 70 percent more transmissible. The quarantine hotel where he worked currently has two confirmed cases of the UK variant and one case of the South African strain, which is also considered highly infectious.

It reportedly took officials more than 11 hours to inform the federal and other state authorities, reflecting the unpreparedness of the public health system to manage COVID-19 outbreaks.

Even as he announced a limited five-day lockdown of Perth and surrounding areas, WA Premier Mark McGowan tried to quell public concern by saying that the worker had used his government's SafeWA app to record his movements.

But Dr Andrew Miller of the Australian Medical Association told the *West Australian*, "I think the government here has been doing its homework in the car on the way to school. We're still not getting QR codes mandatory on the Safe WA app for another couple of weeks at many busy places in our community... the quarantine is not a proper quarantine system because you're still combining it with hotels, you've been slow at getting sewerage testing done... and all these other things, and now we're paying the price for it."

Although no further cases have been detected so far, testing levels remain low. On Sunday, just 3,171 tests were conducted. Lines of cars stretched for hundreds of metres at testing clinics, with some people waiting three or more hours for a test. Then clinics closed at 10pm. The tests increased to 16,000 on Monday, but similar lengthy wait times were reported.

The state government declared a state of emergency and a five-day lockdown, from Sunday until Friday, in the Perth metropolitan area and the adjacent Peel and South West regions, covering about two million people. Given that the coronavirus incubation period is 14 days, this measure is patently inadequate.

The lockdown involves the closure of schools, which were due to reopen on Monday, as well as universities and technical college facilities, indoor sporting venues, large religious gatherings and beauty therapy services. But workers classified as essential are exempt, including construction workers and those in the lucrative mining industry.

People quarantining at the hotel where the security guard tested positive were told that they would remain there until they had returned an additional negative COVID test, and travellers who left the quarantine hotel after January 25 were ordered into self-quarantine until they received a further negative test.

The crisis is another demonstration of the failure of the hotel quarantine system. The events in Perth bear similarities to viral escapes in other Australian states—Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland—which have seen coronavirus outbreaks stemming from hotel quarantine. Despite this, there are no national standards for hotel quarantine.

The hiring of private security guards who are not trained to manage coronavirus patients has been identified as a factor in each outbreak, along with poor

ventilation, improper personal protective equipment (PPE) and a lack of staff testing.

Many hotel quarantine staff are employed on a casual contract basis and therefore have to work multiple jobs, which facilitates the spread of the virus. The Perth security guard, who is in his 20s, had been working a second job as a ride-share driver, although the authorities said he had not worked while infectious.

Although daily testing for all hotel quarantine staff had been agreed to in a “national cabinet” meeting on January 8, it was not until January 29 that daily testing was begun in all WA quarantine hotels.

The young worker tested negative for the virus on January 15, January 17 and January 23. He was not tested again until two days after he developed symptoms, allowing him to be infectious and in the community for around five days. Contact tracers have identified some 151 close contacts he had, plus 68 casual contacts through venue tracing.

Moreover, there are no clear guidelines as to the use of PPE in hotel quarantine. In a press conference, WA Health Minister Roger Cook said security guards working in Perth’s nine quarantine hotels do not have to wear a mask at all times. “There are particular circumstances in which they are required to wear PPE,” he said. “At other times they may not be.”

When Cook was asked if he expected that hotel quarantine staff would be required to wear a mask if they were working on the same floor as a person who had tested positive to the virus, he said: “Not necessarily.”

In a bid to shift the responsibility from itself for the virus escaping from the quarantine hotel, the government has ordered WA police to conduct an investigation into how the security guard contracted the virus.

The Labor government also announced a review of the state’s quarantine arrangements, yet the failures of hotel quarantine have been known for months and were already the subject of an official inquiry in Victoria after a hotel-sourced outbreak killed 768 people last year.

The impact of the COVID emergency is now being compounded by a massive bushfire engulfing areas just to the east of Perth, destroying more than 70 homes and blanketing the city with toxic smoke, reminiscent of last year’s national bushfire disaster.

In response to even the limited lockdown in WA, media outlets representing the interests of big business have denounced the measures and downplayed the threat of the virus.

A comment by Adam Creighton in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper called the lockdown “the biggest overreaction in health policy history.” He wrote: “My economic advice is that the health advice is increasingly unsustainable, given doubts about the efficacy of forthcoming vaccines, and even illogical. Last week the International Monetary Fund said the pandemic had cost governments \$US14 trillion. Here, combined federal and state government debt is on track to rise from the equivalent of 42 percent of GDP in 2018 to 74 percent by this year—a much bigger increase than any other major country.”

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, who has rejected calls for lockdowns during recent coronavirus outbreaks, responded to the WA crisis by denouncing any strategy for eliminating COVID-19. She also attempted to blame individual workers for community transmission from hotel quarantine. “You cannot prevent people who work in the quarantine system from going about their daily lives,” she said, “and whilst people do the right thing most of the time a slight lapse for a minute can cause the disease to spread.”

The response of Berejiklian and the corporate press demonstrates the commitment of governments and the financial elite to preventing any measures, however necessary, to stop the spread of the pandemic and save lives, that cut across the generation of profits.



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