

Australian quarantine leaks underscore pandemic risks

Mike Head**8 February 2021**

Further COVID-19 infection escapes from Australian quarantine hotels, in recent days, have highlighted the continuing dangers of the global pandemic, particularly with the emergence of more transmissible variants. Nevertheless, major sporting events, such as the Australian Open tennis tournament, are being allowed to proceed.

Yesterday, more than 100 people were placed in quarantine, as potential infection zones were identified across Melbourne, where the tennis “Grand Slam” event is being hosted. Within a few days, a second hotel quarantine worker tested positive for COVID-19. It was the third hotel quarantine-linked infection in the city in a week, with all three cases confirmed to be of the more contagious UK virus strain.

At the same time, health authorities issued a precautionary alert for sites in southeast Sydney and nearby Wollongong, after a returned overseas traveller tested positive to the coronavirus, two days after leaving their mandatory two-week quarantine at Sydney’s Sofitel Wentworth hotel.

In recent weeks, quarantine hotel leaks have occurred in all the mainland state capitals—Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide—indicating flaws in the facilities and safety procedures. Unlike the Western Australian government, which imposed a limited lockdown on Perth and surrounding areas for five days last week, including the closure of schools, the New South Wales and Victorian governments rejected such measures.

Each government claimed to be acting on the advice of health officials, but they made their contradictory decisions amid an escalating clamour from the corporate elite for a full and uninterrupted “reopening” of the economy.

Yesterday’s case in Melbourne involved a woman in

her early 50s, who was part of the quarantine operation at the Holiday Inn at Melbourne Airport. She returned a negative test result after a nasal swab on February 4, and returned to work on Sunday February 7, where she developed symptoms and later tested positive. An alert was released just before midnight on Sunday.

The Victorian state Labor government’s Emergency Services Minister Lisa Neville, who oversees the quarantine program, said the woman had not appeared to breach any infection control protocols, and had worn a face shield as well as a mask.

The woman brought to about 80 the number of COVID-19 Quarantine Victoria and hotel staff who have been stood down, to be tested and placed in quarantine for 14 days. There were also nine police officers and 12 military personnel members in that position, Neville said.

Last Wednesday, a resident support officer was confirmed to be infected at Melbourne’s Grand Hyatt hotel, which housed some of the tennis competitors and support staff. As a result, about 600 players and staff were required to isolate for a day and be tested, interrupting warm-up events for the Open.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews insisted that this “one case” would not stop the billion-dollar Open going ahead, with about 400,000 spectators permitted into the stadiums over the next ten days. “Decisions have been made, and we’ll proceed as we can,” Andrews said.

Last month, the lead-up to the tournament was thrown into disarray when numbers of positive coronavirus cases were detected from charter flights carrying tennis players, coaches and officials to Melbourne. Some players were forced to quarantine for two weeks.

In order to ensure that the Open is not disrupted, the

Andrews government responded to last week's Grand Hyatt infection by reverting to partial restrictions in place over New Year's Eve. Masks were made mandatory indoors and the number of visitors allowed in homes was halved to 15. A plan to increase caps on staff in non-essential workplaces to 75 percent of capacity was paused.

Protocols at the state's quarantine hotels were to be belatedly tightened, with workers wearing face shields, "buffers" introduced between large family groups in rooms and a review of ventilation.

In Sydney, the state health department issued a statement on Sunday evening saying the latest victim had not shown any symptoms, but had tested positive on day 16 as part of an enhanced follow-up strategy for people returning from overseas.

This development seems similar to that in New Zealand, where the government reported that a woman tested positive to the UK mutant strain after finishing her quarantine in Auckland in January, despite testing negative twice during her hotel stay.

These cases point to the heightened dangers posed by the new, more infectious variants, which have been able to evolve because of the refusal of governments internationally to impose shutdowns that would cut across returning to work in order to generate corporate profits.

Increasingly, epidemiologists are calling for a re-evaluation of the hotel quarantine system. Clinical epidemiologist Nancy Baxter, from the University of Melbourne, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation yesterday that any hotel suspected of airborne transmission should be immediately removed from the program.

"We need to get the airflow experts, the occupational health and safety experts, they need to go in, they need to assess these places and they need to say 'this hotel has to close,'" she said.

Other health experts have pointed to inherent flaws, such as air conditioning and ventilation problems, in hotels that were not designed for quarantine purposes. Another factor is the hiring of poorly-paid contract security guards, who are not trained to manage coronavirus patients, nor provided with adequate personal protective equipment.

The federal Liberal-National Coalition government last week boosted its orders for vaccines to 150 million

doses, even though the country's population is less than 26 million. This typifies the breakout of vaccine nationalism, with Western powers buying up the majority of supplies.

Yesterday the government declared it was not concerned about the effectiveness of the AstraZeneca vaccine, despite the South African government suspending its rollout, after trial data showed the jab offered limited protection against B.1.351, the coronavirus variant first identified in that country.

Health Minister Greg Hunt told Sydney radio station 2GB on Monday: "I spoke with the UK health secretary in recent days—that's their health minister equivalent—they're having very strong results."

Internationally, leading vaccine scientists are calling for a rethink of the goals of vaccination programs, saying that "herd immunity" through vaccination is unlikely to be possible because of the emergence of such variants.

Regardless of the dangers, the corporate media is ramping up its demands that governments rule out any further safety lockdowns. The February 5 editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* declared: "No more hair-trigger border and city closures by state premiers that constantly leave Australians stranded in their own country and disrupt a still fragile recovery in the domestic economy."

On the same day, an *Australian* editorial praised Premier Andrews for his "sensible, refreshing response" to last week's tennis-related Grand Hyatt case, contrasting it with the "hard lockdown" adopted by his Western Australian counterpart, Mark McGowan.

Last year, the Murdoch media publication denounced Andrews for weeks for partially shutting down Victoria in the face of about 800 deaths in that state. Now it is hailing him for trying to find a new "COVID normal" of "economic rebuilding and recovery" based on his bid to "manage contagion risks rather than eliminate them completely."



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