

# Australia's shambolic vaccine rollout continues

**Martin Scott**  
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More than six weeks after the start of Australia's vaccine rollout, the country has administered just 996,145 doses, less than 2.5 percent of the 40,060,000 needed to vaccinate the entire adult population.

While around 147,000 doses would have to be administered each day to complete the rollout by the end of the year, on its best day, the country has managed only 79,283, and this was followed by four days in which a total of just 31,372 doses were administered.

Concerns that the AstraZeneca vaccine may slightly increase the risk of contracting a rare blood clotting disorder yesterday led the Morrison government to announce significant changes to the rollout plan.

The AstraZeneca vaccine will no longer be "preferred" for Australians under 50 years old, unless they have underlying health conditions making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. Healthcare and other frontline workers who have already received their first injection without adverse effects will still be given the second dose.

This creates a major problem for Australia's vaccine supply, which is heavily dependent on locally-produced AstraZeneca doses. The existing order of 20 million Pfizer doses is only enough to inoculate half the adult population, and so far the country has only received an average of around 150,000 doses per week.

With similar moves to restrict the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine around the world, supply of the Pfizer product is likely to become even more precarious.

In a bid to placate these concerns, Prime Minister Scott Morrison today announced that Australia had ordered an additional 20 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine. He could not say when the vaccines would be delivered, but they are "anticipated" in the last quarter of 2021.

The other vaccine Australia has ordered, developed by Novavax, is only in Phase 3 trials and is not expected to be widely used in the country until the second half of the year.

The dangers of Australia's slow rollout were sharply expressed by the recent outbreak of COVID-19 in Queensland (QLD) and northern New South Wales (NSW), after two unvaccinated healthcare workers contracted the virus while treating returned overseas travellers.

The outbreak resulted in a "snap" three-day lockdown of Brisbane, a statewide mask mandate, and the imposition of some state border restrictions. Limited in scope and duration as they were, these measures set off a flurry of outrage from sections of the corporate elite, which view the vaccine as a justification to abandon all other protections against the coronavirus pandemic that could impact on big business profits.

After insisting for weeks that the vaccine program was on schedule, the federal government was forced to provide some semblance of an explanation for falling more than 3.3 million doses short of the original March 31 target of 4 million.

The federal government initially took aim at the states, accusing them of "hoarding" vaccines. Both the QLD Labor and NSW Liberal-National governments hit back, claiming that their vaccination efforts were being undermined by the federal government.

QLD Deputy Premier Steven Miles said last Thursday: "Some of our hospitals have not known until the morning of [vaccines arriving], how many doses they will have available."

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard accused the federal government of supplying misleading figures to the media suggesting that the state had only administered half the doses it had received, and of "dumping" 45,000 doses on the state in a single day rather than the 13,700 expected.

This week, the federal government laid blame for the glacial vaccine rollout on the European Union, which it claims has prevented the export of 3.1 million AstraZeneca doses bound for Australia.

Federal Agriculture Minister David Littleproud told the Nine Network: "The arithmetic is simple on this. We are 3 million short at the moment. We were 3 million short because of the EU who cut us short."

The EU denied this, claiming that the only export request it has rejected was for 250,000 doses in March. In reality, Australia, the EU, and Britain have all been short-changed by AstraZeneca's failure to meet its delivery targets.

Australia's primary source of vaccines was to be Melbourne manufacturer CSL, where production has also encountered delays. The company had been expected to release two million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine by the end of March, but Health Minister Greg Hunt said on Wednesday that only 1.3

million have been produced, of which 830,000 have been released.

This contradicts a report by *news.com.au* that 3.2 million doses had been produced by the company but 2.5 million were awaiting approval by the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

In addition, Australia has received about 870,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine and 700,000 AstraZeneca doses produced in the UK, for a total of 2.4 million doses. Even assuming wastage of 20 percent, that means fewer than half of the available doses have been administered.

Phase 1a of the rollout, which includes 678,000 quarantine and border workers, frontline healthcare workers, aged care and disability care residents and staff, began on February 21 and was slated to finish in early April, but is now expected to take two months longer.

The delay has not been officially announced, but was revealed through government tender documents issued on March 16, seeking additional providers to assist with Phase 1a throughout the month of May.

The fact that the government is engaging new contractors at this stage shows clearly that supply is not the only factor slowing down the rollout. Decades of funding cuts and privatisation have left Australia's health system without the resources to carry out an efficient mass vaccination rollout.

This is most sharply expressed in aged care. By the end of March, only half of Australia's aged care residents had received their first dose, and the situation for aged care workers is even worse.

With so few Australians having received even one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, the country is only beginning to confront the challenge of ensuring that second doses are administered on schedule. Already though, the signs are worrying.

Karen Price, national president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners told the *Age* Wednesday that numerous General Practitioners (GPs) and other health workers had received their first doses of the Pfizer vaccine but were now unable to receive their second.

These frontline workers, who were eligible to receive the shots during the first phase of the rollout, were injected with "leftover" doses from the Commonwealth-run aged care vaccination program to avoid wastage.

Aspen Medical, one of the contractors tasked with vaccinating aged care residents and workers, admitted on Tuesday that some healthcare workers "did not have their first vaccination recorded accurately on the Australian Immunisation Register."

Price said: "Getting the right second dose is critical. You can't give them a first dose of Pfizer and a second dose of AstraZeneca. That is just absolutely not on. The planning for the second dose has to be watertight."

The beginning of Phase 1b, in which vaccines can be administered by GPs, has brought further problems, with doctors frustrated by the unreliable supply of vaccines.

The slow progress of the first phases of the rollout has caused the government to push back the date from which pharmacies will be involved from May to June.

Australia's vaccine debacle has raised the ire of big business and the corporate media, but this has little to do with the health of the population. Instead, their criticisms have centred on how the slow rollout will impact their demands for an end to lockdowns and border restrictions.

In an editorial on Monday, the *Australian Financial Review* wrote: "Mass inoculation hubs would improve the chances of vaccinating the 6 million elderly and other vulnerable Australians as soon as possible. At this point, there would no longer be any risk-based health case for snap lockdowns and border slamming."

Federal Labor MP Joel Fitzgibbon echoed the corporate complaints, declaring on Monday: "There is a hurry, because we can't get the economy running again until we have broad-ranging vaccination."

Despite the slow rollout, the federal government has announced a "travel bubble" allowing people to move between Australia and New Zealand without quarantine, and is considering extending this to other countries in the region as soon as August.

These moves, along with the increasing hostility of the ruling class to any COVID-19 precautions, present a serious threat to the Australian working class, which, by the most generous estimates will not be fully vaccinated before the end of the year.

While the Australian vaccine rollout can only be described as a debacle, the continuing threat of the pandemic cannot be resolved on a national basis.

With global case numbers growing, and new variants emerging, no country can truly declare itself safe from COVID-19 until vaccines are distributed throughout the world. The biggest roadblock to this objective is the capitalist system, which insists that the preservation of human life is worthwhile only insofar as it generates a profit for massive pharmaceutical corporations.



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