

Epidemiologist warns of “inevitable” COVID-19 outbreaks in Australia

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James McCaw, a prominent epidemiologist and mathematical biologist at the University of Melbourne, has said the danger of a substantial coronavirus outbreak in Australia is greater than at any time since the pandemic began in February last year.

The warning is an indictment of state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. Over the past year, they have only instituted coronavirus safety measures when compelled to do so by health staff and other workers.

The sacrifices made by ordinary people to prevent the spread of the virus have been undermined repeatedly, as governments have prematurely lifted restrictions, refused to establish an effective quarantine system, and failed to develop a mass vaccine rollout.

This has led to a situation in which Australia remains imperilled by potential mass outbreaks, despite several times eliminating most community transmission of the virus and currently having very low infection numbers.

McCaw told the *Age* over the weekend that it was “absolutely inevitable” that COVID-19 would spread in Australia. His comments carry particular weight, because he is leading a research team providing pandemic modelling to the federal government.

The health expert pointed to the emergence of more infectious strains of the virus around the world, as well as the surging of the pandemic throughout the Indo-Pacific. India is in the grips of the worst disaster to date, with confirmed infections around 400,000 per day, and an official daily death toll topping 4,000. The catastrophe, which has overwhelmed the hospital system, is resulting in a sharp uptick in case numbers in neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, and infections are mounting in a number of Southeast Asian nations.

McCaw noted several factors that rendered Australia particularly vulnerable. He referred to a spat of virus “leaks” from hotel quarantines—17 over the past six

months—and said it had partially been luck that these had not spread widely. Further such leaks were likely. “We will expect incursions at least once a month and more often,” McCaw said. “And while we mix more socially, the chance of one of those taking hold goes up very quickly.”

McCaw warned: “The virus will win. But it won’t have a devastating impact if we are vaccinated.” The vaccination effort, however, is a complete shambles.

Each issue that McCaw highlighted underscored the subordination of public health to the profit interests of big business, by governments and the corporate elite they represent.

From the earliest stages of the pandemic, medical experts urged the federal and state governments to establish purpose-built quarantine centres, outside the major capital cities. Their appeals were rejected, and more than a year into the COVID crisis, the overwhelming majority of international arrivals are still being sent to hotel quarantines. The hotels have no filtration systems capable of preventing airborne transmission of a virus, nor the equipment of a medical facility.

Throughout the pandemic, the quarantines have been staffed by low-paid casual workers, who are frequently compelled to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. These arrangements have allowed governments to spend as little as possible, while providing a bonanza for the hotel corporations, which would otherwise have been struck by the decline in international travel.

The quarantine crisis came into stark relief earlier this month, when the federal Liberal-National government imposed a blanket ban on travel from India, and threatened citizens with fines and imprisonment if they attempted to return. This anti-democratic and discriminatory edict followed a sharp rise in the number of confirmed cases in the quarantines. Because of the lack of infection controls, the authorities claim that the only

“safe level” of cases in quarantine is 2 percent or less.

The India ban has endangered some 9,000 Australian citizens trapped in that country. Despite widespread opposition, the government has refused to lift the blockade before its scheduled end on May 15. A Federal Court judge yesterday rejected a legal challenge to the ban, declaring that the draconian provisions of the Biosecurity Act override the common law right of citizens to return to their country of origin.

At the same time, senior government representatives, such as Defence Minister Peter Dutton, have absurdly claimed that the quarantine system has “worked well.” They have announced just six repatriation flights from India beginning on May 15, a grossly inadequate number, and no one who tests positive will be allowed to board, leaving them to the mercies of India’s crisis-ridden hospital system.

Already, the quarantine hotels have resulted in the first community infections in Sydney in several months. Last week, a husband and wife, who had not travelled abroad, tested positive. Genomic sequencing connected their infections to a returned traveller from the US in a quarantine hotel in the city.

Underscoring the dangers identified by McCaw, the New South Wales state Liberal-National government responded with minimal measures, including requirements that masks again be worn on public transport and some indoor facilities. The restrictions were further eased yesterday, even though the exact means by which the infection was transferred is not known, leaving a “missing link.”

This is in line with the lifting of virtually all restrictions by the federal government and state administrations, Labor and Liberal-National alike. Over recent months, caps on attendance at sporting matches and other mass events have been lifted. Interstate travel is unrestricted. Everything has been done to ensure that health measures do not impact on the profit-making activities of big business.

The overturning of earlier safety measures was largely justified by the claim that the vaccine rollout rendered them unnecessary. However the inoculation campaign is among the slowest of the advanced capitalist countries.

Last month, the federal government abandoned any deadlines for the vaccine rollout. This came after the March target of four million jabs fell short by some 3.4 million. Since then, the situation has not improved.

Just 2.5 million people have received their first dose of a vaccine, compared with the 48 million shots required to

inoculate the adult population. Only several hundred thousand people have received the required second dose.

Those who have not received a vaccine include tens of thousands in the priority 1A rollout. Late last month, the federal government admitted that just 7 percent of disability care residents and nurses had received a shot, even though they were supposed to be among the first inoculated.

A broader rollout has scarcely begun. In New South Wales, a mass vaccine hub was finally opened this week, but it administered little more than 2,000 doses in its first day of operation. The *Guardian* has estimated that if the rollout proceeds at its current pace, it may take 30 months or more for the vaccine to be administered to the entire adult population.

The federal government, collaborating with state and territory administrations, the majority of them Labor-led, oversaw Australia’s vaccine procurement. The government was still negotiating procurements in December, well after many countries had begun inoculations. It rejected calls for a diversified vaccine purchase, instead settling on a rollout centred on AstraZeneca’s Oxford vaccine, supplemented by 20 million Pfizer doses, and Novavax, which is still in the trial stages.

AstraZeneca was selected because it was the cheapest. But it also has one of the lowest efficacies, at around 70 percent. Health advice that people under the age of 50 not take AstraZeneca, because of the risk of a rare blood-clotting disorder, has further shaken the already shambolic rollout. The majority of people under 50 are not forecast to begin receiving a vaccine until late this year.

The vaccine and hotel quarantine crises, and the warnings of potential outbreaks, underscore the fraudulent character of claims that Australia has escaped the pandemic. The same ruthless pro-business program has governed the official response here as everywhere else.



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