

# Australian government belatedly moves to vaccinate aged home residents, workers

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When the Australian state of Victoria re-entered a state of lockdown on May 27 after a spate of new COVID-19 infections, 29 nursing homes remained unvaccinated, despite a target date for completion of the first round of vaccinations passing six weeks earlier.

The situation highlights the fiasco that is the vaccination program in Australia. Thousands of aged care residents and workers are now at risk of serious health complications and death through coronavirus infection. The elderly in aged care homes are the most vulnerable to the disease—during Victoria’s second wave of infections in 2020, 655 aged care residents died in for-profit homes.

Federal Liberal-National government health minister Greg Hunt hastily tried to head off the political damage by announcing that vaccinations would be finalised in the homes within two days. It remains to be seen whether this will be enacted, or if it will represent yet another failed vaccination target.

An aged care worker at a home in Melbourne’s western suburbs Arcare Maidstone was diagnosed with COVID on May 29. Her infection threw the state Labor government into a quandary, as they struggled to “confirm the nature” of her contamination. The commander of the state’s response team, Jeroen Weimar, said her case was of “significant concern,” because it could be a “mystery case” without a known link to previously identified infections.

The worker had received a first but not a second dose of a coronavirus vaccine.

On May 31, another worker at Arcare and at least one resident tested positive. Only one-third of the 110 staff, and 53 of the 76 residents had received their first vaccination shot—and none their second.

Yesterday it was revealed that one of the positive staff members had also worked shifts at BlueCross Western Gardens nursing home in the outer working-class suburb of Sunshine while potentially infectious. The dangerous

practice of low-paid casual staff being forced to work at multiple facilities resumed in November after the federal government lifted prohibitions imposed on it during last year’s pandemic.

At a nearby aged-care home in Footscray, Doutta Galla, the vaccine rollout proved especially chaotic. The home, which saw nine coronavirus deaths in 2020, had been scheduled to have the first doses of vaccines administered from May 17 to May 28.

Staff booked in flu shots for residents for May 2 to follow Department of Health guidelines that there be a 14-day break between vaccination for the flu and the COVID-19 vaccination. But then the federal government contractor Healthcare Australia administering the vaccines, insisted on giving the COVID-19 vaccines on May 12. The clash with the flu vaccine forced the postponement of the vaccine rollout in the home.

Meanwhile, Healthcare Australia cancelled scheduled vaccinations for 97 aged residents at the Jewish Care Home in inner-suburban Windsor half an hour before commencement, due to insufficient staffing. This home had 33 COVID infections in 2020. The cancellation was only reversed after the federal health minister intervened.

Hunt declared on May 27: “There are 598 residential aged-care facilities in Victoria; 582 of those have received at least their first dose, seven are to receive their first dose today and the remaining nine tomorrow, that will bring the residential aged-care facility within our home state of Victoria to 100 per cent.”

This was a misleading statement. On ABC Radio, Professor Joseph Ibrahim, head of Monash University’s Health Law and Ageing Research Unit, pointed out: “They are talking about vaccinating the building. They’re not talking about vaccinating the population in the building. When Greg Hunt says all the homes have been vaccinated, have 100 per cent of the residents been vaccinated or 10 per cent of the residents been

vaccinated?”

In April 2021, Professor Ibrahim pointed out that some major questions about the vaccine rollout in aged care remained unanswered. These included how consent would be dealt with (about half the residents in aged care have dementia) and whether those in palliative care would be vaccinated.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison tried to deflect criticism of the aged-care vaccination debacle, telling Murdoch’s *Herald Sun*: “No system is foolproof, so when challenges come like this from time to time, you address them, you address them together, calmly, patiently, understanding of the difficulties that this clearly will impose on Victorians over the course of the next seven days, and seek to minimise the disruption and that dislocation as much as possible.”

Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck tried to avoid responsibility for the government’s program by blaming the residents themselves. When asked by Channel Nine how he’d feel if he was a resident in a home that had not yet received a first dose, Colbeck replied: “Some of them have chosen not to take the jab, which is a little disappointing, but it’s been their choice.”

Families of unvaccinated residents were outraged, and operators at several facilities also challenged his claim.

The aged-care home vaccination debacle is a class issue. The corporate elite and the political establishment, Labor and Liberal alike, regard the elderly as a costly burden, no longer part of the workforce and forcing expenditure on pensions, healthcare, and other services. The government’s criminal negligence on the national vaccination drive stands in sharp contrast with its rapid-response funnelling of billions of dollars in public money into the hands of big business and the ultra-wealthy.



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