

Australian government's vaccine guidelines change again

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24 June 2021

Eighteen months since the first COVID-19 case was detected, and with almost 180 million infections and over 1.8 million deaths, millions of ordinary people face a growing threat because of the uneven and haphazard administration of immunisation programs.

Vaccines have been rolled-out in multiple countries, but none has reached a level that would ensure herd immunity. Australia, an advanced capitalist economy, has one of the slowest COVID-19 vaccination programs in the world.

The Morrison Liberal-National Coalition government's approach to the vaccine rollout is one of ever-changing guidelines, pronouncements and target dates. The initial date promised by the government for full vaccination of the entire population was October 2021, but this was rapidly abandoned to one in the indefinite future.

Although Australia currently has comparatively few COVID-19 cases, this can rapidly change, with the pandemic raging at unprecedented levels internationally, via highly infectious variants dominating in India and the UK. New clusters, primarily involving the extremely transmissible Delta variant, have emerged in Melbourne and Sydney.

No government internationally has ensured that their populations are fully vaccinated. The US claims almost 50 percent vaccinated and the UK close to 60 percent, after they commenced their program in December 2020.

The Australian government's vaccination program, however, began months later on February 22. Currently a total of 5.52 million doses have been distributed around the country, accounting for roughly 20 percent of the population, with only 3 percent fully vaccinated.

In an attempt to divert attention from the government's responsibility for its slow and shambolic

vaccine rollout, the corporate media is attempting to blame the Australian population for what it insists is "vaccine hesitancy." This is a slander against ordinary people.

A survey published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* purportedly shows that about 15 percent of adults who participated were "not at all likely" to get the vaccine, with 14 percent "not very likely." Similar figures for vaccine hesitancy, however, can be seen internationally. The US has 31 percent hesitancy, with 19 percent unwilling to get vaccinated and 12 percent uncertain.

Those reluctant to be vaccinated have been denounced by the corporate media and the political elite, with accusations that they are destroying any hope of reaching herd immunity and reopening borders.

"Vaccine hesitancy," however, is not primarily the result of anti-vaccination sentiment, which is very rare in Australia. Most estimates for anti-vaccination beliefs are between 4 and 8 percent of the population.

The main sentiment expressed by those surveyed is concern about the development of thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS), which has caused severe illness and deaths in Australia and internationally as a consequence of the AstraZeneca (AZ) vaccine.

Health experts around the world have reported incidences of the condition to be "very rare," and Australian authorities initially dismissed the concerns about TTS. The Morrison government, however, was forced to restrict the AZ vaccine to those over the age of 50, because of the risk of clotting, while insisting that it was safe for this age group.

Last week, however, the government changed the guidelines again, to exclude AZ vaccines for over 50s and to restrict them to over 60-year-olds. This followed

two deaths and 60 people suffering from TTS, after their first AZ shot.

Just over 840,000 people in the 50- to 59-year-old cohort have received their first AZ dose. They now face the dilemma of whether to have the second. Health authorities advise that there are no cases of TTS following the second dose, and are urging this cohort to receive the second shot. Confidence in the vaccine and the government's advice, however, is plummeting.

The high number of people voicing concerns about being immunised is also being fuelled by the Morrison government's shambolic rollout of vaccinations, an expression of its indifference, and that of its state counterparts, to the population's health and wellbeing.

Initially, the Morrison government set a tiered approach to vaccine distribution, with four million people supposed to receive their first dose by March 31. These included the most at risk, such as the elderly in old age homes, those suffering disabilities and their carers, along with frontline health employees and quarantine workers. The government, however, was almost 3.5 million short of its target by that date.

According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), only 10 percent of aged care workers had been vaccinated by mid-June. As of last week, half of Victoria's 6,000 paramedics had not received their first shot.

Aged care workers, moreover, were only vaccinated if the contracting companies had leftover doses, following the inoculation of aged care residents. Many members of this very low paid and often immigrant workforce had to queue up for hours, in their own time at external vaccination centres, to get the jab.

Unions covering these high-risk workers have maintained a deadly silence over this criminal neglect, and the dangers facing their members.

In March, aged care provider Warrigal reported that 80 to 90 percent of aged care staff had registered to get vaccinated. Warrigal CEO Mark Sewell told the ABC that "months of confusion" had seen staff wanting the vaccine drop to 63 percent "because people have been reading about side effects [and] it's been complicated to register and even to get to a venue."

Recent government declarations about making vaccination mandatory for aged care employees are an attempt to place the blame for this debacle on the workers.

According to current reports, only 119,044 aged care residents have been completely vaccinated. The remaining 32,239 residents have had one dose and 34,633 no dose at all. These figures, however, must be treated with a great deal of skepticism.

Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck admitted, in a recent federal Senate Estimates hearing, that statistics on the numbers vaccinated in the sector had not even been recorded. This means the real level of vaccinations, of most categories of frontline health workers, is unknown.

This situation, and the parlous state of Australia's health system, is a direct result of decades of government cuts. Like their counterparts around the world, Australia's federal and state governments, Labor and conservative alike, have systematically run down health services, leaving hospitals understaffed, underequipped and unable to cope.

Government declarations that its vaccination programs will resolve the worsening coronavirus pandemic are illusory. Unless vaccination programs are accompanied with public health measures, such as social distancing and mask wearing, and proper lockdowns where necessary, infection rates will continue to expand.

Running parallel with the Morrison government's shambolic vaccination program are increasingly shrill demands by big business and the corporate media for "no more lockdowns" and a rapid reopening of international borders and the economy as a whole. The population, corporate business declares, "has to learn to live with the virus."

While millions of workers and ordinary people have consistently demonstrated that they want to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, this is impossible within the framework of capitalism, where profit is considered more important than people's lives, and governments act accordingly.



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