

Australia: Delta variant spreads through aged care facilities in Sydney

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16 August 2021

As the highly infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus spreads beyond Sydney, the New South Wales (NSW) capital, to regional cities and the other eastern states of Queensland and Victoria, cases are again being recorded among staff and residents in aged care facilities.

There have now been over 7,000 cases of coronavirus across NSW since June 16, and the list of new exposure sites is growing rapidly. As of August 13, there were 83 active cases of COVID-19 among residents and staff in 17 residential aged care facilities.

Most of the aged care cases have been at the Wyoming Nursing Home in Summer Hill, in Sydney's inner-west, with 27 of the facility's 61 residents infected. Two residents have died and nine staff have been infected, including five carers and two contract cleaners.

Other outbreaks include the infection of two staff members and eight residents at St George Aged Care Centre in Sydney's south and three staff at Bankstown Terrace Care Community. At the Hawkins Masonic Village in Edgeworth in the regional city of Newcastle, 13 residents and three staff have tested positive. Less than a third of staff at the Edgeworth facility had been fully vaccinated.

The Wyoming Nursing Home cluster originated with an agency nurse who had only received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccination and had worked at three other aged care facilities while infectious.

One of the main ways that the coronavirus was transmitted to aged care facilities in previous outbreaks was via health staff working at multiple sites. This, coupled with inadequate PPE, infection control measures and the already appalling conditions in many aged care facilities, saw the virus infect over 2,000 aged care residents and kill 685, 655 of them in Victoria.

Last year, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, which is responsible for the administration of the private aged care sector, instituted a rule requiring

workers to be only employed at one facility. The directive was accompanied by a subsidy to the private operators, which would supposedly flow on to compensate workers for their loss of shifts.

These measures, however, were subsequently withdrawn, not on public health grounds but because the Liberal-National Coalition government opposed any mandated wage-rise for workers in the sector or guarantee of job permanency. Canberra's principal concern was to make sure there was no lasting disruption to the super-exploitative labour practices in aged care established by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

While the original directives were ostensibly reinstated in June this year, they did not apply to all local government areas. It has also been revealed that workers contracted by agencies in aged care were granted exemptions from the multi-site work ban.

The now rising cases in aged care highlight the abysmally low rates of vaccination. Only around 58 percent of staff at Wyoming Nursing Home had received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and just six percent were fully vaccinated.

While the aged care residents who tested positive for coronavirus at Wyoming Nursing Home were hospitalised, the remaining 27 residents who returned a negative test were left in the facility for another four days until another resident tested positive on August 6, at which point they were hospitalised. Fifty of Wyoming Nursing Home's 61 residents had been vaccinated.

Attempting to shift the blame onto workers and residents for the outbreak, NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard insisted that it was "a strong message though to everybody that you should get vaccinated because out of those 10 [residents], who for various reasons refuse to be vaccinated, seven are positive." Hazzard claimed that the number of infections were the result of a Christmas in July "superspreading event" at the facility.

In fact, the rising number of coronavirus infections in aged care facilities is the responsibility of the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National, who after decades of healthcare funding cuts, have done nothing to boost the health system during the pandemic. Lockdown measures were delayed, despite warnings from epidemiologists, and only limited restrictions imposed, allowing non-essential workplaces to remain open despite the list of exposure sites indicating that they are the primary places for the spread of infection.

Whilst the government and media have repeatedly blamed the workers for the perilously low rate of vaccinations, the main reason that aged care workers, nurses, paramedics and other essential workers are not yet vaccinated is because the government has failed to guarantee adequate supplies. Vaccine procurement and distribution has been driven by minimising government costs and providing a boon to private contractors.

Four months after the designated March 31 target for full vaccination of all aged care and healthcare workers, thousands of aged care workers and other frontline health staff remain unvaccinated. Currently just over 26.2 percent of Australia's population over the age of 16 is fully immunised.

There have been ongoing reports of aged care and other health workers being told to get vaccinated in their own time or being given "leftover" doses after an on-site vaccination of residents.

To divert attention from the vaccine rollout debacle, Australia's bipartisan national cabinet announced on June 28 that the first dose of COVID vaccinations would be mandatory for aged care workers by September 17. Government officials also scapegoated workers, attempting to blame them for the failure of the rollout.

The Morrison government subsequently announced a temporary exemption from the deadline where access to a vaccine has not been available prior to September 17. It also announced that exemptions could apply "where compliance with the mandatory vaccination requirement will undermine the quality of care available to residents—for example, high rates of community transmission has exposed multiple Residential Aged Care Facilities with high numbers of staff furloughed requiring immediate deployment of workforce to provide care."

In other words, the government has refused to make any commitment to ensuring that the vaccine is made available to aged care staff or that there are workforce surge staff to replace employees who become infected.

Aged care workers are still reporting that they are

having difficulty in accessing the vaccine. Figures from July 21 showed that just one in four aged care staff were fully vaccinated.

It has also been revealed that thousands of home care workers, not included in the government's vaccination mandate, remain unvaccinated. One of the largest aged care providers, RSL Lifecare, has reported that just 5 percent of its home care staff are fully vaccinated. Staff said that they tried to get vaccinated but were told that it could take six to eight weeks for an appointment.

The outbreaks occur as a growing number of health workers and their patients are testing positive for coronavirus. A cluster at Liverpool hospitals in the city's southwest has risen to eight staff, including a student nurse, along with 29 patients, seven of whom have died.

The lack of preparation of the health system for a resurgence of the pandemic is a damning exposure of the priorities of all governments which place profits over the lives of health workers and their patients.

Indifferent to the life and death issues confronting health workers, the health unions have remained virtually silent about the outbreaks. The unions have not called for any united struggle of health workers to establish safe workplaces but have isolated workers' strikes and industrial action and forced health employees back to work without their demands for adequate staffing, improved conditions and wages being met.

No faith can be placed in the unions or the government to protect the lives and welfare of health workers, their patients, families and communities. Workers must take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by and answerable to the workers themselves, as a counteroffensive to the government's profit-driven policies.



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