

Omicron outbreak in Sydney school as Australian governments reject safety measures

Oscar Grenfell
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Australia's first locally-acquired infections of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus were confirmed yesterday, with three cases at a school in a working-class western suburb of Sydney. Ten other pupils are COVID-positive, with testing underway to determine whether their infections are of the new strain.

Twelve other cases of Omicron have been confirmed among returned travellers.

The outbreak is an indictment of all Australia's governments and the entire political establishment. Since the emergence of the variant late last month, they have focused their efforts on denying or downplaying scientists' warnings of the dangers posed by Omicron. The entire priority has been ensuring that nothing disrupts a profit-driven "reopening of the economy," involving a permanent end to lockdowns and virtually all other safety measures.

At a "National Cabinet" meeting on Tuesday, the leaders of the territory, state and federal administrations unanimously agreed there "was no immediate need to change current settings" in response to Omicron. They emphasised that the aim was "to limit the rate of Omicron incursions into Australia, rather than eliminate it at the border." That is, they decided to allow the new variant into the community.

This criminal decision has been accompanied by a propaganda barrage.

Federal officials, including Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly, have touted unverified assertions in the media that Omicron may be less deadly than previous versions of the virus. They have invoked the limited evidence about the virus to declare there is "no proof" it is vaccine-resistant.

In a deranged reprisal of the "herd immunity" strategies that have resulted in mass death in the US, Britain and elsewhere, some have called for Omicron to be allowed to spread as widely as possible, because it "could be" more "mild" than Delta.

To all intents and purposes, this is what the governments

are doing. They waited until November 27 to even institute travel restrictions on southern Africa, well after that measure had been taken in other countries.

The respective Liberal-National and Labor administrations in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, the most populous states, have permitted all other international travel to continue, including from countries where Omicron has been detected. The only measure they have instituted is a cosmetic requirement for those arrivals to "self-isolate" for 72 hours.

Because the international border was opened as part of the broader lifting of restrictions last month, an unknown number of travellers from southern Africa entered Australia in the weeks before Omicron was identified. NSW Health said last week it was "reprocessing" the COVID tests they completed on arrival, and had so far done 300.

Because no purpose-built quarantine centres have been constructed throughout the pandemic, international travellers who tested positive for Omicron are being accommodated in private hotels and apartment blocks, incapable of preventing airborne transmission. Only confirmed infections and passengers designated as close contacts have been directed to these facilities.

This means there are likely hundreds of people in the community in NSW, and probably Victoria, who have been exposed to the variant. Multiple flights over the past week have landed carrying infected passengers where co-passengers were not quarantined, requiring NSW Health to scramble to locate them for self-isolation. Most simply have been instructed, through the media, to get tested and isolate.

The absence of any safe quarantine program, which has resulted in almost all previous COVID outbreaks in Australia, and the ending of virtually every safety measure in NSW and Victoria, has all but guaranteed Omicron's spread.

A quarantined case has been confirmed in the Australian Capital Territory and another in the Northern Territory. The

state borders between NSW, Victoria and South Australia remain open, so an outbreak in any of them could spread across the country. This has been demonstrated in South Australia. Having repeatedly eliminated COVID transmission, it has reported 40 Delta infections since reopening its border in October.

Early last week, it was confirmed that two travellers with Omicron had been infectious while in the community in western Sydney. Yet even then, the state government refused to institute any safety measures.

Yesterday, it was announced that a student at Regents Park Christian School in western Sydney had tested positive to Omicron, despite not having travelled or had known links to anyone who had. Then two more cases were reported, with ten more under investigation. NSW Health is investigating whether the virus was spread at an indoor rock-climbing venue on November 27. If that were the source of transmission, the virus has been circulating for a week.

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Health Minister Brad Hazzard tried to downplay the seriousness of the outbreak. Hazzard urged the public to keep the situation “in perspective,” again promoting conjecture that Omicron “may not be anywhere near as bad” as previous variants. Lockdowns were “almost off the radar” and would be considered only if there were a “major change in the spread of the virus.”

Today, NSW recorded 325 new infections, the highest number in more than six weeks. One hundred were in Sydney’s southwest, where Regents Park Christian School is located. Because genomic sequencing has yet to be carried out, some infections may be Omicron. NSW Health is now “urgently” conducting sequencing on hundreds of past infections, to determine whether the strain is circulating widely.

The state Labor Party opposition, in line with the national bipartisanship on the “reopening,” has said virtually nothing about the developing crisis. NSW Labor leader Chris Minns again declared last week he was “not going to criticise the government.”

Labor and the trade unions are playing a central role, backing the dangerous reopening of schools. In Victoria, the state Labor government herded teachers and parents back into the classrooms last month, amid more than a thousand new Delta infections a day in that state. This has resulted in confirmed infections at 759 schools.

In NSW, the Teachers Federation and the Independent Education Union welcomed the resumption of face-to-face teaching, which has led to more than 500 schools outbreaks. Both have suppressed widespread opposition to the reopening, and appear to have said nothing about the cases in Regents Park.

Developments are refuting the ruling class assertions that Omicron is less lethal. Hospital admissions in South Africa, where the variant was first detected, have soared. Children admissions are mounting, with babies under the age of two now accounting for 10 percent of the COVID hospitalisations. Epidemiologists, along with Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel, have stated that existing vaccines will almost certainly be less effective against Omicron than previous variants. Breakthrough infections among vaccinated people are being reported in a growing list of countries.

Undeterred, the entire Australian political establishment insists that the reopening must proceed. Interviewed in the *Australian* today, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg summed up the line, declaring: “We must hold our nerve. We have to learn to live with the variants of the virus.” Announcing GDP figures last week, he told big business: “Lockdowns are behind us.”

The homicidal implications were spelt out in another *Australian* article. Chris Kenny wrote: “What are we waiting for—a formal surrender from the virus? Or perhaps a government guarantee that when we shuffle off this mortal coil it will be from dementia, pneumonia, cancer, influenza, or heart disease—anything but Covid-19?” The pandemic, Kenny wrote, should be “background noise.”

His comments came after the death last Saturday of Gillian Dempsey, a nurse at Melbourne’s Box Hill Hospital, believed to be the first health worker in Australia known to have died after contracting the virus at work. On Thursday, an Aboriginal woman from the remote township of Binjari became the Northern Territory’s first victim of COVID. The current Delta outbreak has resulted in well over a thousand deaths since July.

For the ruling elite and its governments, these social tragedies are merely collateral damage, a necessary price for the full resumption of corporate profit-making activities.



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