

Australian immunologist warns of Omicron “disaster”

Mike Head
21 December 2021

In a widely-watched video, a Sydney-based clinical immunologist and immunopathologist has warned that the city faces a hospital catastrophe next month because of the rapid spread of the extremely-transmissible Omicron mutation of COVID-19.

In his 18-minute video posted to Facebook early on Sunday morning, Dr Dan Suan said “we are sleepwalking into a catastrophic Omicron disaster in January if we don’t do something about it right now.”

Suan has wide experience in working with COVID patients at a major Sydney hospital, as well as in vaccine research. He explained that he had spent Saturday studying Omicron data and in discussion with senior scientists and health experts across the city, who agreed unanimously with his concern.

The picture that he painted, on behalf of his colleagues, is in stark contrast to the campaign of lies and misinformation of the federal, NSW and other state governments—Liberal-National and Labor alike. Suan said he did not speak for NSW Health “and certainly not for the NSW government.”

His video was an appeal, based on the scientific data available on the Omicron variant, to the people of Sydney to take matters into their own hands under conditions where the government had abandoned the population to the virus.

“We risk turning Christmas Day into a simultaneous super spreader event all across Sydney in thousands of houses,” he said. “And if everyone catches Omicron on Christmas Day, there will be a hospital-based disaster in early January.”

Citing Saturday’s official infection statistics in New South Wales (NSW), he said: “2,400 cases today mean there are several thousand more people already infected, they just haven’t tested positive.”

That warning is being confirmed already. Today,

NSW recorded 3,057 COVID-19 cases and two deaths. Infection numbers have soared 21-fold since November 28. On that day, 144 cases were notified as the federal and state governments began to lift all remaining safety measures despite the emergence of Omicron.

Suan said the transmissibility of Omicron, plus the fact that it stays in the air much longer than previous variants and its resistance to vaccines, means it has the potential to cause a massive outbreak. “It can infect virtually everyone,” he said. “Virtually the entire Sydney population is at risk of catching Omicron.”

Even though about 94 percent of people aged 16 and over are double-vaccinated in NSW, Suan said only people who have a “normal immune system and have been triple vaccinated” are adequately protected. Children under the age of 12, who are completely unvaccinated, were particularly in danger.

“Omicron is much more contagious than Delta or anything else we’ve seen before,” he said. “The mutation in the virus means that it is able to stay in the air much longer and the consequences of that is that one person can infect many more people.”

Speaking against the backdrop of a government-media misinformation campaign about the supposed “mild” character of Omicron, Suan cautioned against underestimating its severity, saying there was “no good evidence” on whether that was true. In fact, “the data suggests it is equally as severe as other variants.”

Even if Omicron were “slightly less severe,” if “the outbreak is huge and you put those things together, we’ll still have a huge number of people needing to be hospitalised. It will overwhelm the hospital system.”

The doctor referred to NSW Health Minister Brad Hazard’s acknowledgment that the state’s cases could rise to 25,000 a day by late January. Suan calculated that, even if vaccines provided 70 percent protection

against hospitalisation, this could mean 750 admissions a day. Within two days, the statewide total would exceed this year's previous wave peak of 1,200 hospitalisations.

Suan said infections and isolation of health staff would intensify the crisis, pointing out that 10 percent of hospital staff were already "down" in the UK.

The immunologist urged people to immediately get tested if they had symptoms and contact others themselves should they test positive. Pointing to the jettisoning of virtually all measures to prevent infection, Suan said: "Unfortunately, the government has removed contact tracing, so you have to do your own contact tracing. You are now NSW Health contact tracers."

This was one of four things he recommended for people to avoid disaster. The others were to wear masks while indoors, reconsider going to events this week, get a booster vaccine if eligible, and talk to one's families about Christmas, suggesting options like prior testing, or moving gatherings outdoors.

On Sunday night, in an effort to broadcast his message as widely as possible, Suan contacted Channel 10's "The Project." On that Sunday night national TV show he again warned: "The Omicron variant has some characteristics which mean that it is a profound public health threat and, because of our social mobility at the moment, it's spreading very quickly."

Questioned by the program panellists about whether his comments constituted "alarmism," Suan said the community had previously worked with the health workers and governments to "crush" earlier waves of the pandemic. Now, however, "unfortunately, the government has left the field, so it's up to us."

The doctor particularly drew attention to the danger of Christmas events spreading the virus to the most vulnerable—older people, those immune-compromised and children.

Show host Hamish Macdonald said other "experts," like former federal deputy chief health officer Nick Coatsworth, were "hitting back at what they say is some alarmism about the Omicron variant." Macdonald asked: "I mean, is there a risk that this is stoking unnecessary fear?"

However, Suan insisted that enough data had now been gathered about the Omicron variant. "We know how contagious it is; we know that it escapes the

vaccines; and we know how quickly it spreads...

"If you infect enough people with Omicron, a certain proportion of people need to go to hospital. That proportion is reduced by vaccines—that's the whole point—but not enough... if you infect enough people, you still have a huge number of people that will need to go to hospital—a number that well exceeds the hospitals that are ready to cope."

Although Suan was speaking about Sydney, his intervention is equally relevant everywhere, including across NSW and Australia as a whole, where infections have started to soar in states like Queensland and South Australia where the pandemic had largely been suppressed.

The doctor's concerns are clearly widely felt. As of this writing, his video has been viewed 167,000 times, with more than 10,000 shares and over 3,000 comments on Facebook, with thousands more on Twitter and other social media platforms.

However, Australia's federal and state governments, led by Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison, NSW Liberal-National Premier Dominic Perrottet and Victorian Labor Party Premier Daniel Andrews, continue to insist that the population must learn to "live with the virus" for the sake of the economy.



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