Australian medical experts speak out against the scrapping of pandemic safety measures

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As COVID-19 infection numbers continue to soar to record highs across the country, fuelled by the extremely transmissible Omicron mutation, Australian governments are defying increasingly concerned warnings by scientists, epidemiologists, doctors and other health experts about the "live with the virus" reopening drive.

Federal, state and territory leaders, Liberal-National and Labor alike, are not only blithely dismissing the growth of infection numbers, which soared well over 5,000 new cases nationally today, but the advice and appeals of leading medical figures.

A widely-watched and impassioned social media video by Sydney immunologist Dr Dan Suan, declaring that people had to take public safety into their own hands because governments had "left the field," has become part of a growing number of calls by health professionals and workers for an end to the overturning of essential public health protections.

Representing doctors, Australian Medical Association (AMA) president Dr Omar Khorshid stated yesterday: "Omicron is emerging as a huge threat, even though we don't yet know its severity, the numbers are really scary… Even with a lower severity than Delta it will still cause significant pressures on hospitals and ICU [intensive care unit] beds when the cases reach the thousands."

A health worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* this morning that the Western Sydney Local Health District "is being told to prepare for 10,000 cases per day in the area, meaning 60 hospital admissions per day, before the end of January."

Under this scenario, the worker said, the capacity of Westmead, the largest hospital in the western district, would be exceeded in ten days.

Former AMA president Kerryn Phelps posted a video on Facebook last week in which she stated: "A policy of deliberately expecting to infect children and other vulnerable people, and in fact 'everyone,' is counter to any known or accepted public health practice."

Calling for "a multi-faceted approach that includes vaccination (including third doses of current vaccines and development of new vaccines), masks, ventilation, PCR and rapid antigen testing, ramping up tracing, isolation and quarantine," Phelps stated: "No single precaution will work."

But, she continued, "that is not what is happening." As a result, Phelps warned, "it will be up to each individual and each family and friendship group to inform themselves."

COVID-19 infection records were broken in at least four Australian states and territories today. In New South Wales (NSW), 3,763 new cases were reported, a 23 percent increase on yesterday's record of 3,057. Two people died from COVID-19 in the state yesterday.

In Victoria, 1,503 new infections were reported, with six deaths. In Queensland, 186 new infections were recorded, more than doubling the record set yesterday. South Australia reported 198 new cases, up from 154, while the Australian Capital Territory recorded 58, also a record high.

Hospitalisations are starting to rise, despite the claims of governments that Omicron is a "milder" variant. In NSW, where Omicron is the dominant strain, 302 people are hospitalised with COVID-19, 80 percent higher than a week ago, and 40 are in intensive care, up from 24. By December 13, more than 3,400 more patients were being treated at home, a rise of nearly 1,000 in a week, and NSW Health has stopped reporting those figures until January.

Professor John Wilson, president of the Royal

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Australasian College of Physicians, told the *Guardian:* "If not checked, a surge in cases will further burden our already exhausted health systems due to an overwhelming rise in hospitalisations."

Wilson said gruelling hours, low pay and the danger of contracting COVID-19 was already resulting in an exodus of health workers.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard admitted yesterday that 1,400 health workers were furloughed due to COVID-19 infection or exposure, more than three times the 459 reported on December 13.

While the government-media "live with the virus" drive has been based on the high uptake of vaccinations, numerous experts have objected that most people are entirely unprotected against Omicron.

In a Twitter post on Monday, epidemiologist Professor Mary-Louise McLaws wrote: "I calculate just 30-35 percent of Australians have symptomatic protection from Omicron, based on UK study & Australian data. Boosters 3 months after 2nd dose & free rapid antigen tests are essential."

University of South Australia epidemiologist Professor Adrian Esterman said: "If you've had two doses of AstraZeneca—and that's the majority of older people in Australia—you have almost zero protection against being infected by Omicron." He described the governments' scrapping of health protections as the pandemic worsened as being as bizarre as "Alice in Wonderland."

OZSage, a group of epidemiologists and medical scientists, warned on Monday that the reopening "roadmap" imposed by the "National Cabinet" of federal, state and territory leaders had been based on the assumption of "functional contact tracing."

The OZSage statement said: "In Victoria and NSW, the decision was taken by governments to abdicate responsibility for contact tracing, which is a pillar of epidemic control. COVID-positive cases or close contacts are now expected to do much of their own contact tracing."

Professor John Kaldor of the Kirby Institute told the *Sydney Morning Herald:* "The worst-case scenario is we have tens if not hundreds of thousands of cases early next year and these cases lead to many cases of serious disease because the vaccine is not as effective against Omicron."

Kaldor said: "This is the first time that I feel that there's a divergence between my perception of what is needed to manage public health and clinical resources in the coming few weeks, and what seems to be actually happening."

There is growing recognition among these doctors and experts that their reasoned, scientifically-grounded appeals to government are running into a brick wall. In order to serve the profit interests of big business, Australian governments are defying these dire warnings and refusing to re-implement even the most basic measures to stem the growth of the pandemic.

The impassioned appeals of Suan and others for individuals to take their health into their own hands have gone viral on social media and won an important response, reflecting significant concern among the population over the virus threat.

Fundamentally though, a public health crisis cannot be overcome on an individual basis. Vaccination, quarantine, testing and contact tracing are all measures that must be implemented at the state, national and global level.

Capitalist governments around the world have demonstrated repeatedly that they oppose taking these actions because they would undercut corporate profits and the financial markets. As a result, more than 5 million people have died, according to vastly understated official tallies, and the real figure is likely more than 18 million.

Elimination of the COVID-19 pandemic is essential and medically possible, but it will be achieved only by a global movement of the working class, guided by both a socialist perspective and the best medical and scientific advice available. It is for this reason that the *World Socialist Web Site* has initiated the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic to answer the official lies, misinformation and cover-up, and outline an program based on human health, not the dictates of the financial markets.

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