

Australian governments let loose soaring COVID-19 infections

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27 December 2021

As the country's new daily COVID-19 cases surged past 10,000 during the Christmas break—far exceeding any previous high during the pandemic—governments in Australia openly declared that mass Omicron infections were inevitable, even necessary.

There is shock and outrage among health workers, medical experts and workers as governments wash their hands of the rapidly developing disaster. Soaring case numbers are already overwhelming testing facilities and producing rising hospitalisations, deaths and aged care outbreaks.

“We’re all going to get Omicron,” Brad Hazzard, the health minister in New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state, insisted, speaking on behalf of that state’s Liberal-National Coalition government.

This has produced legitimate public anger toward that government, headed by Premier Dominic Perrottet and toward the federal Coalition government, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, but this is a bipartisan, business-driven policy.

In neighbouring Queensland, state Chief Health Officer John Gerrard said the spread of COVID-19 was “necessary.” Standing alongside Queensland Labor Party Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, he stated: “In order for us to go from the pandemic phase to an endemic phase, the virus has to be widespread.”

To willingly expose the population to mass infection with a virus that causes potentially deadly or lifetime “Long-COVID” illness flies in the face of all public health principles. It displays criminal indifference to human life, determined by the profit demands of the corporate ruling class.

There is nothing inevitable, let alone necessary, about the COVID-19 pandemic. It was entirely predictable, and predicted, and the virus can still be eliminated. But governments in Australia and internationally have repeatedly opposed the necessary safety measures—mass testing and contact tracing, mask-wearing and the closure of non-essential workplaces, combined with universal vaccination and temporary lockdowns.

Moreover, as is now painfully obvious, governments ran down the chronically underfunded and understaffed public healthcare systems for years and then refused to adequately ramp up the testing, tracing and hospital services needed to protect the population.

Even the corporate media, which has bombarded the population with misleading government claims that Omicron is “milder” than the Delta mutation, cannot hide the worsening outcomes. People are queuing for hour after hour to get tested, often to be turned away, then waiting for up to five days for the results. If sick, they have to rely on ambulance and hospital systems that are already overburdened.

Yesterday, this supposedly “less severe” mutation officially claimed its first life in Australia. The man in his 80s acquired his Omicron infection at the Uniting Lilian Wells aged care facility in North Parramatta, a Sydney suburb, despite being classified as “fully vaccinated.”

On the official government figures, Australia passed the 10,000 daily new cases mark for the first time on December 27, when 10,186 cases were confirmed. The majority of the infections are in NSW—over 6,000—and Victoria—over 2,700—but the surge is growing quickly in the states that had previously largely suppressed the pandemic for nearly 18 months—Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. Reported new daily cases in Queensland rose above 1,100 for the first time today.

Moreover, the positivity rate—the ratio of positive test results to the total test figure—had shot up to 6.5 percent as of Sunday from 1.73 percent a week ago and 0.71 percent a fortnight ago.

Epidemiologist Alexandra Martiniuk told the *Guardian*: “Early in the pandemic, the World Health Organization set 5 percent test positivity and below as the marker of having infections and transmission relatively under control.”

Given the testing and tracing delays, health experts estimate that these statistics understate the true level of infection by a factor of three to ten. That means the daily infections already could be between 30,000 and 100,000.

The spread across the continent is clearly going to become even more serious in coming weeks. Modelling suggests 25,000 cases a day in NSW and 40,000 nationally by late January if no effective action is taken. That will swamp the already inundated health systems.

The breakdown of the COVID-19 testing systems is an early indicator of that looming catastrophe. Inadequate resources and staffing have led to people either waiting for days over the Christmas break for positive test results or being wrongly informed that their results were negative—as happened with 1,395 people tested by Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital.

Far from being inevitable, this disaster is the direct result of the federal, state and territory governments—working hand in glove in the Labor Party-majority “National Cabinet”—dismantling even their previous limited safety measures over the past three months at the behest of big business.

Increasingly, these governments are using this historic political and public health failure as a pretext to scrap basic precautions. Because of the endless queues, people are being told not to get tested, unless they are already symptomatic, if they are travelling or visiting family and friends. That will only lead to people who are asymptomatic infecting others.

NSW Health Minister Hazzard sought to demonise people trying to get tested, deriding “tourism testing,” even as NSW Premier Perrottet urged people to travel to boost tourism industries.

This provoked further dismay and objection among health experts. Leading epidemiologist Professor Marylouise McLaws said people coming forward to get tested should be applauded. “There should have been some planning to understand that Australians would want to go out and get tested before they went to see their families, because they are very responsible people,” she told the media.

Perhaps even more dangerously, NSW Health said on December 26 that because more than 2,000 healthcare workers were furloughed statewide due to COVID infection or contact, workers would return to shifts in 7 days, even after being a close household contact, not the previous 14 days, if they had a single negative PCR test. Those deemed a “social” contact would return after just 2 days.

Employer groups such as the Australian Industry Group are demanding that shortened isolation periods likewise apply to workers in all industries, to stop “hobbling” the economic “recovery.” This amounts to a blatant demand for workers' health to be sacrificed for the sake of generating profits.

Among the many other indices of the deepening dangers:

- Despite governments asserting that Omicron is producing fewer hospitalisations, the number of in-patients

has doubled in NSW in a week, reaching 557 yesterday, with 60 in intensive care units (ICUs). As of December 20, another 8,356 people were receiving care “outside the hospital setting.” Nationally, the number of people in hospital stands at 1,084, up from 824 one week ago.

- By December 27, the number of infections in aged care homes nationally had risen to 998, up from 821 in just over a week, nearly all in NSW and Victoria. By December 23, the last report, 105 nursing homes were in lockdown because of outbreaks, a doubling in a week. That means more deaths are likely.

- The number of COVID-19 deaths has more than doubled in three months from just under 1,000 at the end of August, when government safety measures began to be dismantled, to just under 2,000 by December 26.

On Christmas Eve, facing rising public consternation, the Morrison government suddenly reversed its policy on “booster” vaccines. It said the interval between the second and third vaccine doses would be reduced from five months to four on January 4, and from four months to three on January 31. Only a day earlier, Health Minister Greg Hunt had denounced calls for such a shift as irresponsible, even though double vaccination provides no effective protection from Omicron.

Yet, that revised timetable still means that the vast majority of the population will remain unprotected against the Omicron variant until early February, by which time the effectiveness of the third jab would protect recipients. That is far too late to avert mass infection. Moreover, as the worldwide surge in cases demonstrates, vaccination alone is not enough to protect against infections and deaths.

The government's latest empty PR manoeuvre, one of many throughout the pandemic, is another indication of a mounting political crisis for the unstable government, despite the Labor Party's bipartisan backing for its policies throughout the emergency.

The Omicron crisis is also shattering the government's claims to be producing a world-beating economic recovery. It handed down a mid-year budget review on December 16 that was predicated on no major safety measures being implemented to combat the soaring infections.

That plan embodied the demands of the corporate elite for a full reopening of the economy, in the interest of profit, regardless of the human cost in illness, hospitalisations and deaths.



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