Australian health workers report dire conditions as COVID-19 cases soar

Our reporters
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As COVID-19 infections surge across most of Australia, opposition is mounting among health workers, as well as the general public, to the dismantling of testing, contact tracing and most other public health measures by the state and federal governments.

More than 18,000 new cases were reported in Australia today, an increase of 60 percent of yesterday's record-high figure. The bulk of these were in New South Wales (NSW), where the daily case numbers nearly doubled to 11,201, but they also soared to new heights in Victoria (3,767), Queensland (1,589) and South Australia (1,471).

Largely fuelled by the extremely transmissible Omicron mutation, the positivity test rate continues to rise. It is now above 7 percent in NSW, indicating that the official statistics seriously underestimate the true level of infection.

While governments and the media continue to insist, without adequate evidence, that the Omicron variant is "milder" than the Delta strain, the sheer volume of cases is starting to overwhelm health systems. Already, 1,252 people are officially hospitalised with COVID-19 nationwide, up from 1,146 yesterday. Eight people died from the virus in Australia yesterday.

Such is the level of public concern that lines stretch for kilometres at testing sites around the country, with many people being turned away. Those who are tested are waiting up to five days for results. This breakdown in the testing system means that the official figures are far behind the actual infection rates.

Dr Josie McSkimming, a clinical social worker, wrote on Twitter: "It is patently obvious that in NSW at least you CANNOT get tested for covid. Sick people cannot queue for upwards of 5 hrs, then wait for 3-4 days for results. And now the results aren't always reliable anyway."

Another health worker, Michael Wu, reported on Twitter: "In my telehealth job I'm taking a lot of calls from people who have tested positive to covid on rapid antigen tests, but who can't, for various reasons, obtain a PCR test. The 'official' covid numbers are just the tip of the iceberg."

The governments, Labor Party and Liberal-National alike, are trying to blame the meltdown of COVID-19 testing on "tourism testing." They are denouncing people for seeking to ensure their safety and those of their loved ones before travelling and visiting. But a popular social media thread started on Monday by a pathology worker exposed the real reason people are waiting many days for test results—the lack of resources and staffing.

Reddit user Scematix wrote: "We are currently at the absolute limit of testing, there is literally no more equipment available, let alone staff, in the country to process more samples."

The worker explained that the increasing positivity rate in NSW meant that batch testing of samples was becoming less efficient. "[Batch testing] is all well and good when the percentage of positive results is low, however it all starts to fall apart when this percentage increases and every other batch we test is positive and requires individual testing."

Scematix said that, in pathology labs, and throughout the health care system, "the staffing situation is dire." During the pandemic, "many of my colleagues quit due to the impossible workload, stress, poor compensation and inhumane treatment by our management. … New hires are not yet up to speed, and are expected to process double the amount of specimens with the same amount of resources."

The writer also reported that, on Sunday, "1 in every

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4 patients who presented to the emergency department and were tested with rapid PCR at the hospital which I work at returned positive for COVID.

"We are running out of supplies to operate our rapid PCR analysers, inpatient needs are being set aside so that we can identify positive cases in the emergency department because other testing sites are no longer reliable. People are panicking and flocking to hospitals. As a result, those who are in need for other reasons are being neglected."

Scematix concluded: "What I witnessed yesterday has left a terrifying impression on me. The hospitals are not equipped for this."

Many of the more than 800 replies to the post came from other health workers who corroborated the dire picture painted by Scematix, referred to as the original poster (OP).

One wrote: "We are swimming (DROWNING) in samples. We are 6,000 behind and also sending away anywhere from 200-2,000 samples a day to other locations to help us (this depends on what they will take)."

Another said: "To the OP, well done for speaking up. Politicians and management have no clue. The problem is that the nurses union, the AMA [Australian Medical Association] and training colleges won't speak up and tell the truth."

Responding to the announcement that isolation periods for NSW health workers exposed to COVID-19 would be slashed, Enoon-Mai, a registered nurse, condemned NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Health Minister Brad Hazzard.

She wrote: "It's like living in an alternative universe when you hear Perrottet and Hazzard promote the notion of just accepting we're all going to be infected and that we, as healthcare professionals, should be 'all good' with the prospect we might infect our own patients."

Another wrote: "Those who say 'just let it rip, we'll all get it eventually' have no idea how vulnerable the healthcare system is right now. The overworked healthcare system will affect everyone in some way for decades to come."

On Facebook, Queensland health worker Christine Cocks wrote: "Nurses have dreaded the borders opening to NSW, with the lax public health restrictions with regard covid. And it has come across the border, just as we all knew it would.

"Now nurses are frightened of what the next days/weeks/months will bring. Some are being recalled from annual leave. This is 'allowed' if the circumstances are unforeseen. There is nothing unforeseen about opening borders and allowing covid in, and the impact this will have on our hospitals."

Tammy Copley, another Queensland health worker, wrote: "Our hospital system has been in crisis for decades and has been a lot worse the last 5-10 years. Covid is simply proving that. Nurses and Midwives are leaving the professions and that has been ignored for way too long. We've had two years to plan for Covid and that has been very poorly done."

Opposition to the mass infection policies is not limited to health workers. Social media postings provide some idea of the mounting shock and outrage.

On Twitter, Lexie wrote: "They're branding 'pretend there isn't a pandemic' as 'living with it'." Another Twitter user, Soph, wrote: "'Living with it' is just a government excuse for not wanting to put the resources in to contain spread and stop community transmission."

Far from being inevitable, or even "necessary," as the governments claim, the escalating COVID-19 crisis is the direct product of the actions of Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, carried out to satisfy the demands of big business for the full reopening of the economy for the sake of profit. The failure of basic health facilities, such as testing and tracing, and the mounting stress on hospitals, has also exposed the decades of underfunding and running down the public health system.

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