Mounting crisis in Australian hospitals drives workers to quit

Martin Scott
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As COVID-19 infection numbers and positivity rates rapidly climb across Australia, more and more health workers are warning of the mounting catastrophe in the hospital system.

Amy Halvorsen, a registered nurse (RN) from Westmead Hospital in Western Sydney, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation she had resigned because she could not continue working under "chaotic and dangerous" conditions.

"I am just so sick of the COVID narrative and constantly feeling the pressure of the government's failures," Halvorsen said.

The nurse explained that staff shortages exacerbated by the large number of health workers currently infected with COVID-19 or in isolation, had left her ward with only one third of its usual workforce.

She said: "It's scary. We don't have the support to care for our patients the way they need to be cared for."

Health workers and patients had also been put in danger, Halvorsen said, because, in a desperate bid to plug the staffing gap, nurses who had been exposed to the virus and were possibly infectious have been ordered back to work by NSW Health. "They're told to get tested, keep their mask on and only go home if they test positive."

She continued: "I believe this is becoming a health crisis and the public needs to know how dire the situation is inside the hospitals right now.

As of Wednesday, more than 3,800 health workers in New South Wales (NSW) were in isolation.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 260 workers at Liverpool Hospital alone have contracted the virus, while a further 105 are in isolation. As a result, the *Herald* reported, surgeons were this morning emailed an urgent appeal to fill in and provide basic patient care on wards.

Despite the already dire conditions, the southwest Sydney hospital has reportedly been told to expect 600 COVID patients within weeks, up from around 200 at present. Concord Hospital, in inner-west Sydney, is also preparing to treble its COVID capacity.

Halvorsen described the immense pressures on health workers to continue working and remain silent. With staff "too scared" that speaking publicly would get them sacked, and reluctant to strike because "if we walk out people will die," the RN came to the conclusion "the only way I can protest is to leave."

At Tweed Hospital in northern NSW, 18 staff—more than 10 percent—have resigned since December. Nurses at the hospital have reported working "double shifts every day," while doctors have been forced to use their own cars to drive asymptomatic COVID-positive patients home because no alternative transport is available.

Infections are also growing in the highly vulnerable aged care sector. NSW Health authorities have reported around 400 new COVID-19 cases in the sector over the past four days.

At the Lilian Wells aged care facility in western Sydney, 56 residents and 19 workers have contracted COVID-19. Two double-vaccinated residents have died and a further 15 have been transferred to hospital.

In addition to the risk to residents and workers of severe illness and death, isolation measures have also affected care in other ways. The *Australian* yesterday reported a 72-year-old woman in a southwest Sydney facility had not been able to shower in almost a week due to staff shortages.

Across the country, there are currently more than 1,800 COVID-19 cases in aged care.

NSW Health yesterday told the state's hospitals to expect more than 4,500 admissions for the virus within the next month. A senior NSW doctor warned this trebling may occur even sooner, telling the *Guardian,* "in two weeks we'll be having 400 admissions a day," up from around 120 at present.

The doctor warned this would severely limit the capacity of hospitals to treat non-COVID patients: "Almost the entire staffing structure will be diverted to Covid with very little left for people, you know, having heart attacks and strokes [or] gastrointestinal bleeds, or whatever else it is that people are normally in hospital with."

Currently 1,738 patients are being treated for COVID-19 in NSW hospitals, up from 834 a week ago. The number in intensive care units (ICUs) has also doubled in the past seven days to 134, while 33 are on ventilators.

At least 13,000 additional NSW COVID-19 patients are being "cared for outside the hospital setting," while more than 186,000 others are "self-managing" their disease at home, as hospitals and health authorities urge people not to present for treatment unless absolutely necessary.

Ambulance services and emergency departments in NSW and around the country are so overwhelmed that even people who are struggling to breathe are waiting hours for transport and admission to hospital.

Another senior Sydney doctor told the *Guardian*: "This is a real crisis. There's going to be triage medicine," meaning doctors will be forced to delay treatment, even for serious conditions, including "not-super-urgent cancer."

The rapid surge of COVID-19 in Victoria, where new infections over the past seven days are 323 percent higher than the previous week, prompted the cancellation of elective surgery starting yesterday.

The number of patients hospitalised for COVID-19 in the state has grown from 428 on New Year's Eve to 644 today, while the number in ICU has almost doubled from 54 to 106.

A pause on elective surgery was also announced in NSW today.

More than 78,000 new COVID-19 cases were reported in Australia today. The national positive test rate of 34.41 percent indicates that this is a mere fraction of the real total.

Around the country, 20 deaths from the virus were reported today, the highest daily figure since late October.

Yesterday, NSW reported the death of James Kondilios, a 23-year-old former weight lifter who had received two vaccination doses and had no underlying conditions.

The death of this healthy young man exposes the lies promoted by governments, health officials and the corporate media that young people are not at risk from COVID-19 and that vaccination alone can end the pandemic.

Both Victoria and NSW have in recent days made minor changes to public health settings.

In NSW singing and dancing will be prohibited in hospitality venues, entertainment facilities and major recreation facilities from tomorrow, but this will not apply to weddings. In Victoria, the capacity of indoor hospitality and entertainment venues will be limited to one person per 2 square metres.

The changes will have minimal impact on these industries, with many businesses already forced to close because of staff shortages and low patronage as a result of concern over the pandemic.

While these puny measures will do nothing to stem the raging pandemic, they sharply expose the anti-scientific character of the recent limiting of the definition of "close contacts" to only include exposure in a household.

Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley said yesterday the density limit had been reintroduced because the surge in cases was "overwhelmingly" among young people working in hospitality.

The deepening crisis is the product of the criminal "let it rip" policies of Australian state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. In line with the profit-driven demands of big business, these governments have refused to implement even the most basic public health measures, known and understood for centuries, to prevent mass illness and death.

The rampant infection caused by the murderous actions of the ruling class has crippled the already desperately underfunded public health system, which has been starved of resources through a decades-long bipartisan attack on wages and funding, enforced by the unions.

As is the case around the world, capitalist governments in Australia have made it abundantly clear they cannot be trusted to protect the health of ordinary people.

The working class must now take their lives into their own hands, and fight for a socialist perspective, in which the health and lives of the mass of the population are prioritised over the profit interests of a wealthy few.

This requires the formation of new organisations of struggle, independent of the corporatised trade unions and the Labor Party. Workers in the health sector, and throughout industry, must form rank-and-file committees in every workplace, to plan, discuss and implement a program to end the deadly pandemic and eliminate COVID-19.

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