

Inquest evidence exposes COVID disaster at Australian aged care facility

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An inquest is continuing into Australia's worst aged care outbreak thus far in the COVID-19 disaster. Already, the testimony has provided a terrible picture of how elderly people who have worked all their lives are treated as expendable and left to die.

Yet 18 months later, the situation is even worse. COVID is now cutting a deep swathe through aged care facilities across Australia, intensified by the highly-infectious Omicron mutation.

At St Basil's Homes for the Aged in Fawkner, a northern Melbourne suburb, 50 residents died during July and August 2020, due to COVID and neglect, after a mass furlough of staff ordered by the Victorian state Labor Party government.

So far, 55 witnesses have testified in front of state coroner John Cain. They include St Basil's staff, family members of deceased residents, and replacement staff members who were called in after the original staff members were quarantined. Others were government health officials, private staff providers and doctors at public and private hospitals where dying residents were dispatched.

On December 23, the coroner ruled that two operators of St Basil's, chairman, director and secretary Kon Kostis and facility manager Vicky Kos, must testify. They had previously refused to do so on the grounds that they may incriminate themselves, fearing a WorkSafe criminal investigation under the Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Act.

Furious families of deceased residents had demanded that these two witnesses testify. The Victorian Supreme Court also ruled that that a class action brought by families against St Basil's can proceed.

The evidence underlines the horrendous actions perpetrated upon the residents after the infection outbreak.

St Basil's is owned and operated by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, which runs similar

facilities and other aged care programs across the country. In 2020, the Fawkner facility had 117 residents and 120 staff.

From the Fawkner centre alone, the church took an average of around \$2.5 million per year in rent and fees for providing the facility. This came out of the aged care home's total annual income of \$13 million, 95 percent of it from government grants.

Management spent only \$6,950 on personal protective equipment for staff between January and July 2020. Despite that, on June 30, 2020 a Victorian health department check of St Basil's preparations for COVID-19 said the home was adequately prepared. One staff member reported later: "It was all fake and only done when the Commission came to check."

In early July 2020, a staff member, known in the inquest as Staff Member A, feared that she may have been working while unknowingly positive. When her family tested positive on July 8, she was told to leave work, and tested positive the next day. Few of her colleagues were told why she was sent home. Some she had worked with closely were still working three days later.

By July 20, so many staff and residents were infected that the health department discussed standing down the entire Fawkner workforce. On July 21, without adequate arrangements to replace staff, the state government's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton ordered that all staff be furloughed, as close contacts of infected residents.

This forced the federal government in Canberra, which is responsible for aged care services, to hurriedly send in a replacement workforce, for which it contracted a private provider Aspen Medical.

Counsel assisting the coroner, Peter Rozen QC, told the inquest that by July 24 "the true extent of the neglect became apparent to those at the highest levels of the Commonwealth and Victorian governments."

The replacement staff included just one Greek speaker,

Helen Bagiartakis. Distressed residents were unable to communicate their basic needs to most staff. Clinical records were mixed up, resulting in medications and dietary requirements being missed.

Bagiartakis told the inquest the situation went from “crisis to crisis.” After working for one day, “a number of staff refused to attend.”

A devastating level of confusion prevailed, with basic hygiene abandoned. A nurse from Aspen said some of the new carers did not know how to shower residents. They had previously been employed in community care to do housekeeping and shopping.

Some helpless residents lay untended for days. At one point, the 24-bed dementia ward was completely unattended. For five wings of the home, there were only three carers overnight.

Branka Lyons, whose parents both died, played a taped conversation with Robert McDougall, a concerned carer who tried to contact relatives through Facebook.

He said: “People are missing important medications. I lost a man in the wing yesterday and it was completely avoidable. I’ve spoken to the Department of Health. I asked them, ‘Please shut this place down. This is a place of neglect... it’s the worst [aged care home] I’ve ever seen in my life.’

“I’ve taken photos because I started my shift and people had like three or four trays of uneaten food in their rooms. They’re in soiled bedding, not just soiled, but really bad. People are going mad.”

A senior nurse from Aspen said she was told by manager Vicki Kos that “under no circumstances was [she] or any other member of St Basil’s to be contacted about the clinical care of the residents” once the staff were replaced. Kos had said “everything we would need was on the files” but “we quickly found that was not accurate.”

Once residents began to be transferred to hospitals, distressed relatives gathered outside for glimpses of their loved ones. A call centre set up by the Commonwealth health department to update agonised relatives often gave wrong information, saying that residents were well when, in fact, they were dying.

Hospital officials sent to St Basil’s to assist with the transfers were shocked by the mayhem, with disoriented residents wandering the corridors. The chief medical officer of nearby Epworth Hospital, Dr Luis Prado, said: “I’ve never seen anything as appalling as this in Australia... in terms of health care provided to Australians.”

An experienced nurse told the inquest a pressure sore on one resident was unlike anything she had seen in 20 years. “It hadn’t been dressed and it looked nasty, you were able to see into the wound and see the tendons.”

The St Basil’s tragedy is an indictment of the church, Premier Daniel Andrews’ state government, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s federal government, as well as Aspen Medical.

Moreover, what happened at St Basil’s is a warning of the disaster created by Australia’s governments by letting loose the Omicron variant, under the criminal banner of “live with the virus.”

The pandemic is deepening enormously the crisis in the country’s substantially privatised aged care system. It was already chronically under-funded and under-staffed, with widespread neglect of residents and poor pay and conditions for staff, long before COVID-19.

On December 17 last year, before the full impact of Omicron, the Commonwealth health department reported 54 aged care facility outbreaks. By January 9, this had surged tenfold to over 500 outbreaks.

By yesterday, there were more than 7,000 active cases in about 1,100 facilities, representing some 40 percent of the sector. In just a week, the number of cases had more than doubled from 3,205.

By the end of this week, according to Aged and Community Services Australia CEO Paul Sadler, more than half of all residential aged care facilities could have COVID-19 outbreaks.

The pandemic has brought into the starkest relief the way that the elderly are shunted aside by the capitalist system once they are considered a burden on profits and government expenditure.

Only the working class can and will defend life and health, and ensure the humane and respectful treatment of elderly people. That requires workers taking control of society, guided by a socialist perspective to reorganise economic and social life on the basis of human need, not the profits of the wealthy few.



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