

BA.2 variant fuelling new COVID surge in Australia

Oscar Grenfell
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A rapid spread of the BA.2 variant of COVID, more infectious and deadly than the original strain of Omicron, is such that it can no longer be hidden by a government-media cover-up. BA.2 was first detected in Australia months ago, and by the end of February was reportedly accounting for a third of new infections in New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state.

Despite the circulation of a variant that is resulting in unprecedented surges in a number of countries around the world, Australian governments and the official media have sought to present the pandemic as a thing of the past.

The consequences of the “live with the virus” policy, however, are emerging, with infections now reaching levels not seen since the height of the Omicron tsunami of December–January.

As with every previous surge, the current spread is not primarily the result of the biological characteristics of the virus. Rather, it is the outcome of deliberate government policies that have subordinated public health to private profit.

A speech by Premier Dominic Perrottet at the Committee for Economic Development of Australia summed up the conspiracy by the political establishment, to force the population to “live with the virus,” ensuring new waves of infection.

Perrottet explained that his partnership with Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews had been the central factor in allowing the governments to begin the new stage of the “reopening” in late January, early February. The centrepiece of this was the herding of millions of students and teachers back into the classrooms.

Perrottet explained that he and “Dan” had “worked together” on a daily basis. They had devised a tag team act. If there were criticism of the reopening policies of Perrottet, an extreme right-winger, he could point to identical measures being implemented by Andrews, who was previously associated with limited public health restrictions. Andrews, meanwhile, could present his lockstep march with Perrottet as proof that his latter-day conversion to the “let it

rip” program was sincere.

The collaboration, overseen by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, had “worked perfectly,” Perrottet told the big business audience. It had succeeded in “pushing back” against a “campaign” of epidemiologists and other medical experts, who had warned that the school reopening would result in mass illness and death.

The partnership between Perrottet and Andrews is only the sharpest expression of a complete bipartisanship on the pandemic. Each stage of the “reopening” has been formulated by the national cabinet, composed of the state and territory leaders, most of them from Labor, and Morrison.

What has been the consequence? Hundreds of thousands of students have been infected in the past month-and-a-half. Despite a government insistence that schools remain open no matter what, some have been compelled to send entire year groups home because the spread of COVID means there are not enough teachers. The school transmission is fuelling a much wider uptick.

Nationally, 61,975 new infections were reported yesterday. That is the highest single-day tally since January 21, at the tail end of a tsunami of Omicron cases that overwhelmed the testing system over the summer holiday period. From March 16 to March 23, national infections surpassed 50,000 on four occasions and 40,000 on three.

The number of active cases, i.e., those people who have tested positive and remain infectious, is also ballooning. The figure has exceeded 420,000 today, up from fewer than 300,000 on March 16 and less than 200,000 on February 16.

Because the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system was dismantled during the December–January wave and its aftermath, the majority of new infections everyday are being self-reported after less reliable rapid antigen tests (RATs), generally administered by the infected person.

At the height of a Delta outbreak last year, a record of more than 250,000 PCR tests were conducted in the state of NSW alone. Now, most days fewer than 100,000 PCR results are being reported across the entire country. Some

days the figure is far lower, with just 39,917 PCR test results revealed on Tuesday.

The arrangement is guaranteed to result in a substantial undercount of true infection numbers.

The absence of mass surveillance testing means that the vast majority of asymptomatic cases will not be detected. The RATs system, whereby individuals are supposed to notify the authorities of positive results, but not negative returns, means that there are no longer any accurate positivity figures. The positivity rate, indicating the proportion of positive results from the total number of tests conducted, is crucial to determining how widespread viral transmission is.

In NSW, daily infections are now approaching 25,000, having been in the teens for weeks, after lows of around 6,000 at the end of February. Health Minister Brad Hazzard declared earlier this month that BA.2 will likely be the dominant strain by the end of March, but the absence of mass genomic sequencing means the proportion of new cases that are BA.2 is unknown.

Other jurisdictions where infection numbers are rapidly rising, however, indicate that BA.2 is probably already dominant in large swathes of the country.

In the north-eastern state of Queensland, cases have increased by 15 percent over the past week, with daily infections around 9,000. The state Labor government's chief health officer, John Gerrard, revealed that 58 percent of cases sequenced over the past fortnight have been of BA.2.

Summing up the criminality of all the governments, Gerrard blithely declared that 'We can reasonably expect hospitalisation numbers will increase in the coming days and weeks.' Gerrard added: 'We have always known that the virus will change, it will mutate and with that, cases will wax and wane.'

In reality, the emergence of new and potentially more lethal variants is the direct consequence of the decision by governments to allow COVID to circulate freely, on the grounds that the public health measures required to reduce transmission would impact on production and business profits. Gerrard, while acknowledging that BA.2 is more infectious even than Omicron, insisted that there would be no reintroduction of an indoor mask-mandate or any other safety restrictions.

A similar increase of infections is occurring in most states and territories, meaning that the new variant is likely taking hold across the country. This includes in Western Australia, where the Labor government ended a successful suppression strategy that had largely spared the state from the December–January Omicron surge. Daily infections have skyrocketed from the double digits in mid-February, to over 8,400 yesterday.

The patchwork of often limited sequencing data means that an accurate national picture of the spread of BA.2 does not exist. According to GISAID, a global science initiative that tracks variants, some 69 percent of recent samples from across the country are of BA.2.

In several of those countries where BA.2 has rapidly become the dominant variant, infections, hospitalisations and deaths have exceeded even the Omicron surge. Hong Kong has been hit with an outbreak that for a period was claiming more daily deaths, per million people, than any upsurge of the virus, in any country, over the past two years.

Hospitalisations are already rising, with 2,138 patients admitted across the country, up from 1,782 on March 16. Each of the past three days have seen more than 25 deaths. As has been the case in every previous wave, both deaths and hospitalisations are lagging indicators, showing up in the figures weeks after infections rise. Some 3,577 fatalities have been reported this year, compared with 2,239 in the first two years of the pandemic.

The national cabinet has responded by seeking to ensure that the surge does nothing to disrupt business operations, with policies that will only result in further mass infection.

The body also called for a "transition to not routinely undertaking PCR testing in otherwise healthy people with mild respiratory illness and promote voluntary self-isolation while symptomatic for this group." This policy effectively means forcing COVID-infected workers to remain on the job. In comments after the meeting, Prime Minister Scott Morrison made clear that the changes were dictated, not by public health, but by the need to ensure businesses did not suffer "labour shortages."

According to media reports, health authorities in a number of states have voiced concerns over the plan to scrap the close contact regulations, warning that it will exacerbate the surge. Governments, however, are insisting that it is necessary to press ahead with the homicidal "live with the virus" program. Their refusal to even consider a reintroduction of indoor mask mandates, demonstrates that even the most rudimentary public health measures require an independent struggle by the working class against the entire political establishment.



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