

Australia's COVID hospitalisations at record levels as Labor government rejects safety measures

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It is now undeniable that the COVID pandemic is the worst it has ever been in Australia. Yet all of the country's governments, led by the federal Labor administration, are rejecting even minimal safety measures, effectively consigning tens of thousands to serious illness and hundreds upon hundreds to death.

The response takes to a new level the criminal reopening drive of last December, when the entire political establishment abandoned successful suppression measures and let the virus rip. Then, they peddled misinformation that Omicron was "mild" and that greater levels of infection would result in "herd immunity."

Now those lies are in tatters. The new BA.5 variant results in rapid reinfections, provides no lasting immunity and is claiming lives more rapidly than the deadly Delta strain did in Australia. All that remains is the policy of mass illness and death, a pandemic in perpetuity and the naked subordination of public health to a corporate elite which rejects any measures that would impact on profits.

National hospitalisations on Tuesday reached 5,360, just 30 short of the record of 5,390 reached on January 25. They declined slightly yesterday, but will likely exceed the previous peak sometime this week. The number of COVID patients has increased by more than 2,000 in the first few weeks of July, and have doubled since the beginning of June when there were 2,570 receiving hospital treatment for a coronavirus infection.

Roughly half of the states and territories are at record COVID admissions, while the other half will exceed their previous peaks during the current surge.

Deaths are also increasing markedly. The past three days, including Friday, fatalities have stood at 89, 85 and 75. Over the past seven days, there have been 450 deaths, or an average of more than 64 every single day. That compares with average daily deaths of just over 40 throughout June.

Globally, Australia has gone from having one of the lowest per capita death tolls in the first two years of the pandemic,

to now consistently being near the top of the seven-day rolling average of COVID fatalities per million people. Currently, Australia is sixth by that measure. The only advanced capitalist countries experiencing greater per capita losses are New Zealand and Taiwan.

The weekly fatalities are now well over double the death toll from the 2002 Bali bombings, the worst terrorist attack involving Australian citizens in modern history. Daily average fatalities are almost twice the number of those killed in the horrific Port Arthur massacre of 1996, when a crazed gunman opened fire on a crowd of defenseless civilians.

Those events, and others like them, were treated as major turning points in society. Now, however, far higher levels of death from the pandemic are minimised and downplayed, or simply ignored.

One needs to search aggregator websites, such as covidlive.com.au, to have any sense of the scale of death underway. Most days, the fatalities are not mentioned by the official politicians or even reported in the press. If they are, they are consigned to a line or two, with no sense of tragedy or loss.

There is a strong element of social eugenics in this response, dovetailing with previous complaints in ruling circles over the "aging population" and the costs associated with it. Almost 100 people are dying a week in aged-care homes according to official data, while there are some 700 active outbreaks in facilities across the country. Both are nearing record levels.

It is not only the elderly, however, who are becoming grievously ill. In comments to the *Age* this morning, Dr Marion Kainer, infectious diseases head at Melbourne's Western Health, said that more people in their 30s, 40s and 50s were presenting to emergency departments with acute symptoms.

"What we are noticing is that they are sicker on the wards this time around and they are staying longer than they were during the last Omicron wave," Kainer said. Like other

medical professionals, she noted that some BA.5 symptomology resembled that of Delta, rather than earlier Omicron variants. The new strain, in addition to being the most infectious yet, appears to affect the lungs more severely than earlier iterations of Omicron, which primarily hit the upper bronchial tract.

The virus is spreading unchecked throughout hospitals, with well over 10,000 workers in the sector off sick at any one time. At some major Melbourne hospitals, a third of midwives are off sick or isolating, while growing numbers of pregnant women are contracting the virus, according to the *Age*.

The hospitalisations and deaths indicate that as in December–January, the virus is virtually everywhere. Official national case numbers exceeded 50,000 on Tuesday for the first time since May 19.

Government and health spokespeople have acknowledged that real infections are at least double the recorded data or more. Given the dismantling of the testing system and the absence of any, even nominal contact tracing, even that is likely a substantial underestimate. It is entirely possible that real infections are near or at the peak of 150,000 per day reached in December.

The response of government leaders to the unfolding disaster recalls a criminal who cuts a hose during a blazing inferno. Labor and Liberal-National alike, state and federal, none of them have announced a single measure aimed at cutting down transmission. Over the past two months, moreover, they have withdrawn the limited restrictions that were in place during the December–January wave, including virtually all indoor mask mandates.

A press conference on Tuesday by federal Labor Health Minister Mark Butler and the country's Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly summed up the official criminality. They declared that "millions" more Australians would be infected over the coming weeks. Even though hospitalisations are already at record levels, a peak in the outbreak would not be reached for four weeks, or maybe more.

Kelly stated: "In every state and territory, the number of cases according to those predictions are continuing to rise. So, we're at the start of this wave, not the end. We know that that is associated with hospitalisations, and that what happens in the future really, very much depends on what we do today."

And so what were the esteemed health bureaucrat and Labor minister proposing to do? Butler and Kelly "strongly recommended" masks, but dismissed out of hand suggestions of any reintroduced mandates. Corporate chiefs have laid down the law, declaring that widespread mask-wearing is unacceptable, because it is a reminder of the ongoing pandemic and could result in decreased economic

activity, such as less retail shopping.

The schools would remain fully open, despite being key vectors of the virus, not a cent would be spent on bolstering the hospital systems. The essential elimination measures, such as lockdowns and the closure of non-essential businesses, were not mentioned by either. Nor were they brought up by representatives of a press corps that has uncritically cheered on the policy of mass infection.

That Kelly continues to dispense his pompous evasions as chief medical officer, rather than before a disciplinary board, is itself extraordinary. When the global Omicron wave began in December, he described the new variant as a "Christmas present" and publicly urged governments to allow its spread. As a consequence more than eight million people have been infected and almost 9,000 have lost their lives.

Labor's retention of Kelly sums up the complete bipartisanship of the criminal pandemic response. Butler and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese are responding to the present crisis exactly as conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison would have.

Meanwhile, Dr David Berger is currently under disciplinary sanction from the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). His offence has been to warn of the dangers of COVID, stridently condemn the "let it rip" policies and advocate the scientifically-grounded elimination measures that can end the pandemic.

AHPRA has declared that this principled service to the population risks undermining public health messaging.

Workers and young people should defend Berger, as part of the fight against the "herd immunity" program and all of the political forces implementing it. In the first instance, that means a political struggle against the federal Labor government.



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