

# Australia: Patients forced to wait overnight in overwhelmed Melbourne emergency department

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22 August 2022

Patients are regularly being forced to wait overnight in the emergency department of Box Hill Hospital in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria.

Between March and June this year, 432 people were forced to wait more than 24 hours for treatment at the hospital, often in corridors or makeshift tents. The hospital was unable to provide beds for the patients, due to staff shortages and the immense strain on healthcare caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

On Wednesday evening, an 83-year-old woman had to wait for three hours in a corridor before being moved to a tent outside the hospital's emergency department, where she waited a further 16 hours overnight. The elderly woman had suffered a stroke at the aged care facility where she lives.

The woman's daughter told radio station 3AW that she was cared for by nurses and paramedics, who were unable to leave emergency due to a lack of beds. Regarding the hospital staff, she told Nine News: "They're exhausted and I feel for them. This is not their fault."

She said paramedics at Box Hill had likened the situation to "Guantanamo Bay." The tent, used as an overflow area, was "heated, and the staff are doing their best. It's makeshift, but it's still a tent."

The night before, a teenage cancer patient spent 27 hours waiting in a hallway at Box Hill, where he slept on a row of chairs. William, 18, had completed six months of chemotherapy for Hodgkin's lymphoma, but presented at emergency for a separate neurological issue. When a nurse was finally free to see him and learned of his condition, she reportedly fell on the floor in tears.

The boy's mother said in an interview with ABC Radio Melbourne that they had spent the evening "with many others in a corridor."

She continued: "Will was in hospital last week with an

infection—but when his neutrophils [a type of white blood cell] are so low it's quite a concerning situation... that he's in a corridor of an emergency department during COVID and when there are so many other viruses going around. I get worried about what he is going to catch."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke last week to a patient at Box Hill Hospital. Narelle, a working-class mother, told our reporters that she went to emergency Tuesday night, after experiencing pain and excessive bleeding caused by a hysterectomy operation two months ago. She had to wait overnight before receiving treatment after 20 hours.

"There were about 12 of us camped that night in the waiting room. There was a guy sitting there who had had a fall, his whole head was bandaged up, and there was blood dripping out of him. He was still there Wednesday morning as well.

"There was a man with appendicitis and a young woman with mental health problems, a 20-year-old, that wanted to kill herself, and she was pretty much left in the waiting room by herself. She said 'I could just leave right now. They're supposed to be checking on me.'"

Narelle spent the night on a couch with an IV drip attached to her arm. When two gynecologists took her away for an internal examination to a room without blinds, one of them had to hold a sheet in front of the glass door while the other performed the examination.

She spoke about the pressure on overburdened health workers, who also have to educate student nurses: "Of course the student nurses are slower, they're still learning, and then these poor doctors and nurses look out to the waiting room and see more and more people coming in."

Asked about the stroke patient, Narelle said: "I really feel for that lady and her family but I also feel for the

doctors and nurses. How crappy must they be feeling? They can only do so much. A lot of nurses have left because of what the last two and a half years have done. They can only go to jobs they're sent to, and they haven't had leave."

She was especially frustrated by the media blackout on COVID-19 case numbers and deaths: "We don't hear about the pandemic anymore, it's old news, when there's so many people still dying. I was a fan of the lockdowns. My family was very grateful, we didn't want to risk my mum getting sick, she had brain cancer. There are some people who talk about their 'personal freedoms,' but our family's all triple vaxxed, it was never a question for us."

Narelle caught COVID-19 in March and suffers from Long COVID. "I really struggle with the fatigue, I struggle now to stay awake for more than six hours a day, and after a shower or cooking dinner I'm done."

Asked about the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency's threat to deregister zero-COVID advocate Dr. David Berger for his exposure of government lies about the virus, she said: "That's ridiculous. Since when are we not allowed to speak the truth?"

Narelle strongly opposed state and federal governments' "let it rip" policies and the drive to force workers back into unsafe workplaces. "You get all these people back together, 20 people in a lift, someone might be asymptomatic, and then you've easily got a couple thousand people infected. And guess what, some of them might not have it very bad, but some will have people they love, they'll give it to them, and they'll end up in ICU, and the health system doesn't have enough ICU beds or ventilators or staff.

"Those poor nurses are seeing unnecessary deaths, it just should not happen. I understand we had the most lockdowns in the world, and this and that, but when we did, how low were our daily deaths? I still look up the numbers and I think about those poor people who didn't need to lose their lives."

The current death toll in Australia stands at 13,456. More than 11,000 people have died from COVID-19 this year alone, more than 83 percent of the total since the pandemic began.

The situation at Box Hill is only one example of a far broader crisis of Australia's hospital system. Presentations to Victorian emergency departments have surged dramatically this year, with a record 486,701 people seeking acute care in the three months ending in June. In Queensland, 575,578 people presented to

emergency in the June quarter, up from an average of fewer than 180,000 before the pandemic.

More than 3,400 people are currently hospitalised for COVID-19 across the country and thousands of healthcare workers are unable to work due to infection. Around 2,000 health workers are furloughed each day in Victoria and more than 1,900 in New South Wales (NSW).

The spread of the highly-infectious BA.4 and BA.5 variants of Omicron, nearly as contagious as measles and more vaccine-evasive than earlier strains, and the continued infection and reinfection of the population, are the direct result of official policies. Governments, state, territory and federal, Labor and Liberal-National alike, have allowed the virus to circulate endlessly since the removal of virtually all public health measures beginning in December last year.

This could not have been carried out without the close collaboration of Australia's unions, which presided over the reopening of schools, factories and offices and suppressed the opposition of workers to the homicidal agenda of the ruling class.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation has enforced a ban on strikes by Victorian nurses throughout the pandemic resulting from an eight-year enterprise agreement struck with the state Labor government in 2016. In NSW, where nurses have carried out multiple strikes, the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association has never called for a reversal of the "let it rip" policies, and has done everything possible to silence any discussion of the pandemic during rallies.

The elimination of COVID-19, and the right to high quality, free healthcare for all demands the mass action of the working class, independent of the unions, fighting for a socialist program. We urge health workers to contact the Health Workers' Rank-and-File Committee, to discuss the development of this struggle.



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