

Orange County, California declares health emergency due to viral infections

Liz Cabrera**6 November 2022**

Orange County health officials declared a health emergency on November 1 because of a rapid spread of viral infections, including respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), leading to record hospitalizations of pediatric patients. It follows a similar declaration made by San Diego's public health agency the week before. Orange County is America's sixth-most populous county, with over 3.1 million residents.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), RSV is a seasonal virus that almost all children get by the time they are two years old. Most cases of RSV will cause mild, cold-like symptoms, but it can also cause severe illness such as bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small airways in the lung) or pneumonia (infection of the lungs). The CDC estimates that each year RSV leads to the hospitalizations of 58,000-80,000 children younger than five years old and 100-300 deaths.

Infants are especially vulnerable to RSV. The respiratory virus causes the body to produce excess mucus which can block the tiny airways of babies, who may need extra help to breathe. RSV poses the greatest risk to premature infants, infants less than six months old, children younger than two years old with chronic lung disease or congenital (present at birth) heart disease, immunocompromised children and children who have neuromuscular disorders.

At Children's Hospital of Orange County, (CHOC) a record number of pediatric admissions were already being seen prior to the emergency declaration. According to Emergency Medical Director Dr. Theodore Heyming, CHOC is as full as it has ever been. He believes it's similar to what is happening in other children's hospitals across the nation.

A similar situation is unfolding nearby at Providence St. Joseph's Hospital in Orange and its sister hospital Providence Mission Hospital in Mission Viejo at the end

of October. According to Dr. Brian Lee, Medical Director of the Emergency Care Center at Providence St. Joseph's Hospital, their Emergency Department is at 80 to 90 percent capacity.

Meanwhile, hospital staff and resources are being stretched to their breaking point and will only worsen with the impending COVID and flu surges. To make matters worse, there is only one pediatric hospital in Orange County that could accept overflow patients from other emergency departments of nearby hospitals.

The risk of death and other serious health outcomes will increase for infants, children and adults due to lack of beds and staff. Shortages are already plaguing emergency departments around the country.

Nurses and healthcare workers are posting about the dire situation on social media. An Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurse named Sara in Washington wrote on Twitter, "A patient died in our ED [Emergency Department] lobby because there aren't enough nurses to open admit beds, the ED is clogged w/boarders, & there is no way to see critically ill patients in a timely manner. In response, hospital leadership decides to stop boarding & send [patients] to floors with 7:1 [patient to nurse] ratio," she said.

Linda Aiken, a leading researcher, has found that lower nurse-to-patient ratios are associated with lower mortality rates, shorter length of stay, fewer falls with injuries and pressure ulcers, greater nurse job satisfaction, less burnout and greater nurse retention. Despite this research, hospital CEOs and administrators continue to seek to lower costs through understaffing at the expense of workers and patients.

Research has already demonstrated how overcrowding in emergency departments can lead to worse outcomes for patients receiving emergency treatment. The report indicates that such overcrowding can impact patients in other areas of the hospital as well.

In an article published last month in the journal *Health Services Research*, researchers from Penn State and the University of California, San Francisco examined five million discharge records from hospitals across California between October 2015 and the end of 2017. They found that patients throughout a hospital were 5.4 percent more likely to die of any cause on days when that hospital's emergency department was the most crowded.

The researchers say that since the causes of death haven't yet been explored, it is too early to say whether people are dying because of emergency room crowding. Still, the results show that more people at the hospitals die when the emergency rooms fill up.

This data was also collected prior to the pandemic, meaning the impact of ED overcrowding now may be even greater.

The overlapping surge of multiple viruses circulating in the population could have been prevented. There were numerous warnings by experts of the coming surges of RSV, influenza and COVID-19 but nothing was done to prepare.

The unfolding tragedy is a consequence of the "forever COVID" policy now being pursued by the Biden administration and every state government, which over the past year have systematically dismantled all anti-COVID protection measures based on science. Unlike 2020 and 2021, nearly all school districts had dropped their mask mandates by the start of this school year.

All public health measures during the pandemic have been subordinated to the profit interests of corporations, resulting in the unnecessary loss of millions of lives. The overcrowding of pediatric hospitals and children's health care providers during the present surge of respiratory viruses is a direct consequence of these criminal policies. It stands as an indictment of the capitalist system and its brutal treatment of society's youngest and most vulnerable members.



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