

Up to 25,000 COVID-19 deaths in Australia this year

Oscar Grenfell
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As the year draws to a close, COVID-19 continues to inflict a deadly toll with no end in sight. In Australia, 2022 has been by far the worst year of the pandemic, with fatalities an order of magnitude higher than in the first two years of the global crisis.

The country is a graphic demonstration of the fact that this carnage is the result, not primarily of the biological characteristics of a virus, but of political decisions made in the interests of private profit.

In 2020 and 2021, Australia's death toll was comparatively low as a result of successful mitigation measures implemented by the country's governments under popular pressure. The huge number of deaths over the past 12 months is the direct result of the dismantling of those restrictions and the adoption of a "let it rip" strategy aimed at "reopening the economy."

This essential point was made by Professor Brendan Crabb, one of Australia's leading infectious disease experts and the director of the Burnet Institute. He was interviewed on the popular podcast, Australia Today's Morning Agenda with Natarsha Belling, last week. It was a rare breach in the wall of silence surrounding the pandemic, which is either presented as a thing of the past or a minor inconvenience.

Crabb noted, however, that including excess deaths it is likely that the virus will have claimed 25,000 lives in 2022 by year's end.

Even that figure may be an underestimate. Crabb was extrapolating from excess death figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics this month. They show that in the nine months to the end of September there were 19,986 more fatalities than the historical average.

If that rate holds for the last three months of the year, excess deaths for 2022 would reach 26,648. However, the public healthcare systems, decimated by decades of funding cuts and brought to a breaking point by the "let it rip" program, will be under even greater pressure during

the holiday season. That means there is every prospect that the rate of excess deaths will increase.

As Crabb stated, these are "people who otherwise would not have died. In fact, excess deaths in Australia are normally negative, less than zero. That's why life expectancy has increased every year for the last 70 years in Australia."

Crabb pointedly noted that this historic reversal exposed the fraudulent propaganda used to justify the "reopening" of December 2021. "Can you imagine us sitting here a year ago saying 'we're going to open up and we'll cope with 25,000 deaths?' No one would've accepted that, it would have been outrageous," he said.

Later, the professor remarked: "Nothing else kills 25,000 extra people in a year. COVID is doing that. Influenza killed 300 people this year. And yet influenza was compared to COVID in Australia."

Of the likely 25,000 fatalities of 2022, 14,662 have thus far been officially recorded as directly caused by the virus. That compares with 909 in 2020 and 1,344 in 2021 or a total of 2,253 for the two years. In other words, even going by the official toll, the annual coronavirus death rate has jumped 11-fold this year as compared to last year.

Crabb explained, however, that the fatalities only provide one indication of the broader long-term health crisis that has been unleashed.

He cited recent analyses indicating that as many as half a million Australians, in a population of 25 million, are likely afflicted with Long-COVID. That term designates a host of potentially debilitating conditions that can impact upon virtually every organ of the body. Treasury figures earlier this year indicated that at least 30,000 people were no longer able to work, having been effectively disabled by the virus.

Speaking to this broader situation, Crabb stated: "COVID is driving this crisis, all of it. What happens with

Covid infection is a serious infection that leaves you susceptible to other infections.

“And even more worryingly a signature of Long COVID is what we call immune dysfunction, reactivating Epstein-Barr virus or chickenpox in people because their immune systems aren’t working as they should. This means we have the likelihood of quite a lot of people in the community far more susceptible to infection than they otherwise would be. It’s all COVID, we have to get our head around that.”

The damage caused by the virus refutes the claims, used to justify the reopening, that repeat infections would generate immunity and thereby end the pandemic.

As Crabb noted, while there have been four major COVID waves this year, “we never had a low point. The difference between the lowest point of a wave and the top is only about 4 times. The lowest number of people in hospital in 2022 for Covid was 1,400 people, the maximum 5,500.”

He elaborated: “The July-August wave was Australia’s worst. This one’s looking pretty bad. You would have to be a very optimistic person to think the next one we have in January-February next year is somehow going to be fine.

“The likelihood is that if we keep our current approach of being casual about infection, we’ll keep having waves of this sort. Even more worrying is that the virus evolves in a step change way, like it did when omicron arose in the first place, where this completely different looking COVID arises. The driver of that happening is numbers. The more viral numbers out there, the more opportunity the virus has to evolve into something that can transmit better in the face of immunity that’s out there.”

Like many principled epidemiologists, Crabb framed his important remarks as an appeal to governments to see sense and to adopt essential public health measures necessary to stem transmission.

The experiences of the past year however, in Australia and internationally, have demonstrated the collapse of any mitigation strategy. The alternatives are between a homicidal “let it rip” policy, supported by the entire capitalist political establishment, and the fight for the elimination of the virus, which requires the mobilisation of the working class against the governments and the profit system itself.

That is underscored by the role of the current federal Australian Labor government. In the seven months since it was elected in May, Labor has presided over more deaths than in the entire preceding period of the

pandemic.

Labor has gone further than its conservative Liberal-National predecessor in dismantling even the semblance of a coordinated public health response to the virus. It has overseen the ending of daily reporting of pandemic statistics, including infections and deaths.

This has gone hand in hand with measures virtually designed to further spread the virus. They included the abolition of any requirement to report a positive Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) to the health authorities. Even more significant was the ending of any mandatory isolation period for people who test positive. Together with the termination of limited pandemic leave payments, the clear purpose was to force infected workers to remain on the job.

Even further attacks come into effect on January 1. For most testing sites, it will become necessary to obtain a doctor’s referral to be given a Polymerase chain reaction test (PCR), even though they are more reliable than RATs. Many general practitioners are ending free bulk-billing consultations in response to a virtual freeze on government subsidies, meaning a lot of people will have to pay up to \$70 for such a referral. But Labor’s guidelines indicate that they could be still denied a PCR, given that the tests will now largely be restricted to those deemed vulnerable to the virus.

With testing already at record lows, the obvious aim is to claim that the pandemic is over by no longer registering the vast majority of cases.

Even with the current breakdown of testing, however, more than a hundred thousand infections are being reported across the country every week and there were almost 700 official deaths in the three weeks to Christmas. The Labor government’s program, identical to that of its counterparts internationally, is guaranteeing that the pandemic will continue to exact a heavy toll in 2023.



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