

Australia's second-largest state Victoria blocking people from reporting COVID infections

Oscar Grenfell
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On June 30, health authorities in Victoria, Australia's second largest state, declared they would no longer accept or count reports from members of the general public that they have tested positive for COVID-19 via a self-administered rapid antigen test (RAT).

The move, enacted by the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews, marks yet another stage in the dismantling of a coordinated public health response to the coronavirus. With virtually all safety restrictions, such as mask mandates and indoor capacity limits having been abolished long ago, the Labor administration is effectively declaring it will not even make a pretense of monitoring the spread of the virus.

Victoria is the first to end RAT reporting. Again, the Andrews Labor government is setting a reactionary precedent that will doubtless be followed by the other state and territory administrations.

The change was proclaimed in a two paragraph statement on the state government's coronavirus website. Under the heading "Report your rapid antigen test result," those seeking to do so are informed that they no longer can.

The statement declared: "From Friday 30 June, the recommendation to report your positive rapid antigen test (RAT) result has been removed. You can no longer report your test result online or through the Coronavirus hotline."

It continued: "Using a RAT remains critical to help with early detection, protect others, and allow for care and treatment at the right time. However, with a decline in overall reporting at this pandemic stage, case numbers now offer limited clinical or epidemiological value. The Department of Health will continue to monitor trends and respond accordingly."

As with other regressive changes to public health settings, there was no press conference. The way the shift was presented on the state government website meant that few, aside from those seeking to report positive RAT results, would have seen it.

There was a single article in the corporate media, published by the *Age*, which largely consisted of justifications for the measure. It uncritically cited an anonymous Health Department spokesperson, as well as Professor Catherine Bennett, an infectious diseases expert who has consistently advocated against infectious disease controls during an unprecedented global pandemic.

The Health Department spokesperson said: "RAT reporting has declined since it became voluntary in October last year and no longer informs epidemiological assessment nor public health action."

That ending of mandatory reporting of a positive COVID test was carried out by the Victorian Labor government together with the then Liberal-National Coalition administration in New South Wales (NSW). Its transparent purpose was to artificially limit infection tallies.

The Victorian government and its health authorities are effectively invoking the consequences of their previous attacks on pandemic data to justify even further measures along these lines.

The spokesperson added: "The department continues to monitor trends through comprehensive surveillance system, which includes analysis of hospitalised COVID-19 cases, mortality, wastewater surveillance, PCR results and a range of other state and national surveillance systems."

Bennett similarly stated that hospitalisations were a "less biased" measure of the spread of the virus than self-reported infection numbers. In effect, Bennett after being a cheer leader for the dismantling of all objective data measurement for the spread of COVID now declares that the reporting by people with the disease is "biased."

This is the ghoulish face of the pro-business "let it rip" COVID policy adopted by all governments, state and federal, across the country. Authorities will become aware of new COVID surges by counting the number of their citizens who are grievously ill or dying. The most basic principles of public health, centring on preventing harm to the public,

have been completely jettisoned.

In justification of the change, Bennett further said that only ten percent of people were self-reporting positive results. That is an entirely arbitrary assertion. But if it is accurate, surely it should sound the alarm that vast amounts of transmission are being untracked and the virus is being allowed to spread without check.

In fact, self-reported RAT results account for a substantial proportion of official COVID infection tallies. Last week, for instance, 1,802 people reported their positive RAT result to the Victorian authorities. That appears to constitute more than 71 percent of the total cases in the state that were recorded that week.

The change will thus mean that the official case numbers will fall dramatically, even as people are testing positive.

The change underscores the fact that virtually no assistance is provided to COVID-positive individuals. They are left to contact General Practitioners (GPs), who are vastly overworked. Many GPs are moving away from the state-subsidised Medicare system, due to years of underfunding, resulting in costly doctors' appointments that are out of the reach of many.

That means many people will only receive serious medical care for their COVID infection once they are displaying symptoms of a very acute illness.

The latest measures underscore how far governments have gone in their "live with the virus" program.

For the first two years of the pandemic, Australian governments were compelled by popular pressure to institute safety measures, including lockdowns. While these were implemented later than they should have been, and with innumerable business exemptions, they did succeed in repeatedly eliminating the virus.

Victoria saw the longest lockdowns of any state. Its Labor Premier Andrews was widely popular for his perceived prioritisation of public health.

Andrews parlayed this political capital, into playing the central role in the profit-driven reopening of the economy. Working closely with then extreme right-wing NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Andrews spearheaded the opening up in late 2021, just as Omicron had arrived in the country.

The ensuing wave dwarfed everything before it during the pandemic. It crashed the Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system which up to that point had been provided free of charge. This was then used by governments to justify a turn towards the self-administered use of less reliable RAT tests, often expensive, which people had to purchase themselves.

Over 2022, the governments, most of them Labor, deepened the offensive, dispensing with almost all mask

mandates and indoor crowd restrictions. For most of that time, the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, elected in May, was in office.

Last September, following the deadliest month of the pandemic, which claimed more than 2,000 lives, the governments ended daily COVID reporting. At the end of the month, governments abolished any requirement for COVID-positive individuals to isolate themselves from the community. This was linked to ending all federal pandemic leave payments, and was aimed at compelling sick workers to remain on the job.

Then in October, even the requirement that people report their positive RAT test was overturned. At the same time, PCR testing has been restricted. Federal guidelines at the end of the year indicated that these would now require a doctors' referral and would be targeted at those arbitrarily deemed to be in a "vulnerable" cohort. In NSW and elsewhere, state Labor governments have shut hundreds of PCR clinics.

Now the most basic public health measures, applicable not only to COVID but to respiratory illnesses during winter, are being overturned. The Victorian Labor government is closing six respiratory clinics. The NSW administration has overturned a previous requirement to wear masks in general areas of hospitals.

All of the changes have been supported or tacitly endorsed by the trade unions, including in health, which have functioned as the enforcers of the "let it rip" program, as well as the accompanying offensive against staff conditions.

In the first six months of 2023, 4,513 COVID deaths have been officially recorded across the country. That is more than double the toll of the first two years of the pandemic. But the fatalities are treated entirely as a non-event.

The "let it rip" offensive, and the leading role Labor governments are now playing in its implementation, demonstrates that the fight for public health requires a political struggle against the entire establishment. The experiences of the past period have demonstrated that the pandemic can be ended, through the implementation of scientifically-grounded health measures. But that requires a fight against the capitalist system, which subordinates everything to corporate profit.



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