

Australian experts warn of COVID surge, condemn absence of public health response

Oscar Grenfell
24 January 2024

As is the case in many parts of the world, including the US and throughout Europe, Australia is in the midst of a substantial COVID-19 surge. New and highly-infectious variants, such as JN.1, are spreading unchecked, in a wave of transmission that has undoubtedly been exacerbated by large gatherings and events during the holiday season.

While basic public health restrictions were dismantled long ago, in the current surge, more than any other, the scale of transmission is being concealed from the population. Official politicians never mention COVID, except when they contract it themselves. Most of the media refers to the pandemic in the past tense, even while hospital admissions, one of the few semi-reliable metrics, show a rapid increase in the number of people falling ill.

The whitewashing of what remains an unprecedented global health crisis, is all the more extraordinary given the duration of the pandemic. Today marks exactly four years since COVID was detected in Australia. In that time there has been an enormous development in scientific understanding of the nature of the virus, its transmission and the measures required to halt the spread.

But everything that governments and official health bodies are carrying out is diametrically opposed to the policies that are required to finally put an end to the pandemic.

In this context, an article by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) over the weekend, was a rare breach in the conspiracy of silence that has been maintained by the official media, including the publicly-funded broadcaster.

Entitled “The COVID-safe strategies Australian scientists are using to protect themselves from the virus,” the article contained information and warnings that are now almost entirely confined to the social media postings of critical and principled epidemiologists and their followers.

Among the experts cited was Professor Brendan Crabb,

microbiologist, research scientist and director and chief executive officer of the Burnet Institute.

The article began with a recount of how Crabb first contracted COVID. He had broken his own rules, attending a crowded indoor awards gathering, without the portable air purifier and N95 mask that had to that point protected him from the virus.

In addition to pointing to how the virus is being spread, the anecdote underscored the immense pressure, even on the most conscious COVID experts, to dispense with safety measures under conditions where there is no coordinated, mass effort to halt transmission.

Later in the article, Crabb stated that we are in a “public health Barbieland.” The “make-believe” that society has returned to “normal,” contradicted by the actual and ongoing development of the pandemic, produces a huge “disconnect,” he noted.

Crabb noted that there had been 28,000 excess deaths recorded in Australia between January 2022, corresponding to the “reopening” and lifting of safety measures, and July 2023. That resulted in the first significant decline in Australian life expectancy in the post-World War II period. The Australian Bureau of Statistics and other official bodies acknowledge that the fall is substantially the result of COVID deaths and flow-on effects of the spread of the virus.

“These are unheard of numbers, people who wouldn’t have otherwise died, let alone the hundreds of thousands in hospital—we don’t know exactly because no one publishes the numbers,” Crabb said. The figures were such that they constituted an “elevated public health crisis,” requiring near and long-term solutions.

Most notably, Crabb placed primary responsibility for the widespread transmission on governments and official bodies, including medical.

He explained: “The most common thing said to me is, ‘Brendan, I really do trust what you and others are

saying. But if there was a real problem the prime minister, the government, would be telling us that.’ I don’t think people are all of a sudden profoundly individualistic and don’t care about COVID anymore—that they’re suddenly willing to take massive risks and hate the idea of vaccines and masks. I just don’t think they’re being well led on this issue.”

Crabb particularly criticised as a turning point a statement in September 2022 by the country’s Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly that it was “time to move away from COVID exceptionalism” and to treat the virus as any other respiratory disease. Kelly is a notorious figure, who in December 2021 had likened Omicron to a Christmas present. The ensuing wave, coinciding with the lifting of safety measures, resulted in millions of infections and thousands of deaths.

As Crabb noted, the claims of Kelly and others have been based on the discredited notion of “hybrid immunity.” According to this line, vaccination, combined with broad infections, generates a population-wide immunity that will render COVID benign. The argument is not only false, as Crabb noted and as experience has shown, it is also a lie, aimed at justifying the ending of safety measures because they impinge on corporate profit-making activities. The conscious fraud that has been perpetrated against the population is underscored by the fact that any mass vaccination campaign has largely ended, including for the most vulnerable.

Robyn Schofield, an aerosol scientist at the University of Melbourne, explained the manner of airborne COVID transmission. As summarised by the ABC, Schofield explained: “The main way COVID-19 spreads is when an infected person breathes out droplets or aerosol particles containing the virus—think about aerosols as behaving similarly to smoke, lingering in the air potentially for hours.” Schofield noted that “Air is out of mind until it’s a problem.”

She outlined the ways in which the dangers of airborne transmission can be mitigated against. That includes the use of CO2 monitors and the necessity for a broad based program to improve indoor ventilation and air filtration. Personally, Schofield related that she avoids indoor dining at restaurants and wears an N95 respirator in indoor areas with other people.

As the ABC noted, Schofield, who was diagnosed with cancer during the pandemic, condemned an easing of mask requirements at the Melbourne hospital where she was being treated in 2022. That resulted in a reversal, but since then, virtually across the board, masking

requirements have been limited or ended entirely in healthcare settings. That means the most vulnerable people are continuously exposed to the virus, with their mortality rate if they contract it as high as ten percent.

Associate Professor Stuart Turville, a virologist at the Kirby Institute, contrasted the coordinated public health response to the HIV pandemic of the 1980s with the roll-back of basic measures to fight COVID. “When we look at COVID, it was political from the start and continues to be,” he said. There was no midterm or long term plan to address the virus. Advocates of COVID-safety were maligned and even subjected to abuse. Turville commented that while they were not without difficulties, the public health measures instituted in Australia during the first two years of the pandemic had prevented scenes such as those in Italy and New York where hospitals, along with morgues, were overwhelmed.

According to the latest figures, nationally almost 2,000 people are currently hospitalised as a result of COVID. That compares with a low of fewer than 1,000 in early October. The infection figures, completely unknown, but likely in the tens of thousands every week, will inevitably translate to further illnesses and deaths, together with the range of potentially permanent health complications designated as Long COVID.

What has become clear over the past four years is that the fight against the virus is above all a political question. It requires a struggle against all the official parties and governments, now Labor across the country, presiding over this unprecedented health crisis and placing the needs of profits above health and lives. Above all, what has been demonstrated is that neither COVID, nor any other problem of a complex, mass society, can be resolved as long as policy is dictated by a handful of corporations and capitalist oligarchs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact