

Australian COVID-19 surge continues as epidemiologists urge stricter lockdown

By Patrick O'Connor
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Australian health authorities reported more high coronavirus figures, following yesterday's record number of daily cases.

In Victoria, there were another 627 new cases, following the pandemic-high 723 infections yesterday. The state today surpassed 10,000 total infections. Community transmission is increasing in regional areas, where there are a total of 255 cases, with 159 of these in and around the regional city of Geelong.

Eight more deaths were reported, with half of these from aged care facilities. The protracted underfunding and neglect of Australia's privatised aged care system has produced a disaster. There are 928 active cases in Victoria's aged care homes, and according to the *Guardian*, all but five of these are in for-profit facilities.

There is still no government plan to evacuate all residents from infected sites. Epping Gardens Aged Care Facility in Melbourne's north is among the worst affected, with 90 infections; one of the deceased residents was photographed by the media being removed while appearing to be wrapped up in a roll of carpet. Doctors and health sources reportedly told the *Australian* that several residents were left dead in their beds for hours on end this week.

In New South Wales, 21 new cases were reported today, two from quarantined return overseas travellers and one person who came from Victoria. The other 18 cases were locally transmitted, six from the wealthy inner-Sydney suburb of Potts Point, some of the others from working-class suburbs Bankstown and Wetherill Park.

There was one new case announced today in Queensland, bringing the state total to 11 active cases.

The surge in infections in Victoria has overwhelmed the limited contact tracing infrastructure developed by

the state Labor government. The number of cases classified as "under investigation" totals more than 3,500. During the initial wave of infections this number was never higher than 70 cases.

A sharp divergence has emerged between government policy and a growing consensus from epidemiologists and medical scientists that more stringent lockdown measures are required.

In April, the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and every state government, Labor and Liberal, jointly rejected a strategy aimed at eliminating coronavirus infections. Morrison bluntly acknowledged that the key consideration was to reduce the impact on businesses. In May, limited restrictions on economic activity that had been in place were lifted. As a consequence, in June and July coronavirus infections surged beyond the peak levels of the first wave.

State and federal leaders nevertheless remain adamant that there will be no imposition of measures adversely affecting corporations, such as school closures and the shutdown of non-essential industries. The Australian ruling elite has chosen to protect profits over lives.

Increasing numbers of epidemiologists and medical experts are speaking out in protest.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) has urged more stringent lockdown measures. "Pharmacies, supermarkets, medical facilities, they clearly remain essential and it's extremely important they remain open," AMA President Tony Bartone said. "After that we really need to produce a very strong, clear reason why we should be having any activity in that sector. We need to move to the next level."

Tony Blakely, head of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Epidemiology and Biostatistics, was lead

author of a report published in the *Medical Australia* that modelled the likely impact of different lockdown measures. He concluded that there was a 50 percent chance of eliminating coronavirus infections in Victoria within six weeks, if stringent restrictions were imposed.

The report recommendations included, “close all schools,” “tighten the definition of essential shops to remain open [...] department stores, hardware stores, and such like should be closed,” and “tighten the definition of essential workers and work.”

Blakely told the ABC: “If you’ve got ‘essential’ industries open that aren’t really that essential, it’s quite likely that in two weeks’ time that may be where the virus is propagating. So I would recommend at this point in time that industries that aren’t really essential, footwear stores, that type of thing, are closed so we’re moving to a tighter definition of what is an essential worker or essential workplace. That would see the department stores that sell shoes, clothes, construction sites closed; it would only allow industries open that are essential to us. So that’s food, healthcare, pharmacists and the aged care facilities.”

The government has flatly refused such measures. Morrison has repeatedly insisted that everyone who has a job is an “essential worker.”

Victorian authorities reported earlier this month that 80 percent of all infections are occurring in workplaces. Among the worst affected are the Bertocchi Smallgoods meatworks in Thomastown (121 cases), Somerville Meats in Tottenham (106 cases), and the Woolworths warehouse in Mulgrave (30 cases).

A new cluster emerged today at a major construction site in Melbourne’s central business district. Twelve workers at the Multiplex Premier Apartments site on Spencer Street have reportedly tested positive, and the site has been temporarily closed for cleaning.

James Trauer, head of Monash University’s Epidemiological Modelling Unit, wrote a comment for policyforum.net titled, “Australia’s pandemic policy made a second wave inevitable.”

He explained: “When looking to the Melbourne-centred second wave of coronavirus infections, Australians should only really be surprised that outbreaks of the same scale haven’t occurred elsewhere in the country. Given the government’s response to the pandemic, this was equally foreseeable

just ~~two~~ weeks ago. The ~~fundamental~~ problem with Australia’s COVID-19 response has been that its stated goal was to achieve suppression, but it failed to put in place an approach that recognised the realities of this strategy.”

Bill Bowtell, University of New South Wales adjunct professor, has also condemned government policy. On Twitter today he stated: “What is happening in Victoria is the regrettably entirely foreseeable outcome of flawed strategies set down in March evidently acting on ‘expert medical advice’ at all stages. This advice is secret but clearly did not demand governments secure quarantine, strengthen aged care facilities, mandate masks coming out of first lockdown or communicate properly with the people. This advice rejected NZ elimination objective in favour of ‘living with COVID-19.’ Today’s crisis is what we created on the basis of poor decisions.”

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