

Australian state makes masks compulsory as COVID-19 spreads

30 July 2020, by Rod McGuirk



Residents at a Uniting Gen Regen AOD residential facility try on new masks in Melbourne, Thursday, July 30, 2020. Australia's coronavirus hot spot, Victoria state, will make wearing masks compulsory after reporting a record more than 700 new cases on Thursday, mostly among the vulnerable residents of aged care homes. (Daniel Pockett/AAP Image via AP)

Australia's coronavirus hot spot, Victoria state, will make wearing masks compulsory after reporting a record 723 new cases on Thursday, mostly among the vulnerable residents of aged care homes.

Masks have been compulsory for the past week in the state capital, Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city with 5 million people, and a neighboring semi-rural district.

Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews said masks or similar face coverings will become compulsory across the state starting late Sunday.

Residents around the city of Geelong will not be allowed to have visitors in their homes from late Thursday in a second measure aimed at slowing the spread of the virus from the city.

"We have low (COVID-19) numbers in regional Victoria and we want to jealously guard that," Andrews said.

Melbourne and neighboring Mitchell Shire are half way through a six-week lockdown, which Andrews said could be extended. Health authorities had expected the infection rate would have plateaued by now.

"Every Victorian, I think, deep down knows and appreciates that unless everyone plays their part, this lockdown will not end any time soon," Andrews said.

"If we were to reopen across metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire today, then it won't be 700 cases a day—you can add a zero to that and our hospitals will be overrun and we will be conducting more funerals," he said.

Melbourne is an increasingly alarming anomaly in Australia, which has all but eliminated community transmission elsewhere.

The 723 new cases, mostly in Melbourne, exceeded the previous record of 532 cases on Monday. Victoria also set a daily record of 13 deaths, 10 of them in the beleaguered aged care sector.

Andrews described aged care as a "big, big challenge." Military medics and interstate nurses have been brought into Melbourne nursing homes to boost standards of care.

Maria Iatrou's uncle died of COVID-19 in the worst-affected facility, St. Basil's Homes for the Aged, which has recorded 111 cases. Her aunt, who suffers dementia as well as COVID-19, has since been transferred to a hospital, although the family was kept in the dark for five days over her fate.

"The communication has been horrific. It's been so

bad," Iatrou said. "It was a bungle from beginning to end."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, whose [federal government](#) regulates nursing homes, said Melbourne aged care facilities are now faring better with military and outside nursing help.

"It is only a small number of facilities that I would say are in the acute stage of the critical list," Morrison said.

While Victoria's fluctuating daily infection count brings either hope or alarm, [health authorities](#) are most concerned by new cases of unknown origin that stubbornly hover at around 50 a day.

Morrison would not rule out more pandemic restrictions to drive down new infections, but doubted that any would extend beyond Victoria.

Critics of the Victoria government's new rural restrictions question why people in the Geelong region will be able to meet friends at a pub but not in their homes.

"There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the restrictions," Jason Schram, mayor of Colac, which is covered by the new Geelong restrictions, told Melbourne Radio 3AW.

"It just seems like they've done this to say: 'We're doing something in these regional area hot spots,'" he added.

Iatrou, who owns a Melbourne café, says city residents have become much more reticent to go out to buy a takeaway coffee as the infection numbers climb.

"It's surprising, it's eye-opening and it's quite scary if we can't get a handle on it," she said. "At the moment, the numbers sound big to us because we haven't had to deal with the numbers that a lot of countries in the world have had to deal with."

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