Australia's COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations hit new records

January 4 2022

Medical staff collect COVID-19 swabs from people at a drive-though clinic in Sydney, on Dec. 25, 2021. New virus cases in Australia surged to record levels on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022, increasing the strain on hospitals and testing centers across the country. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Rycroft, File

New virus cases in Australia surged to record levels on Tuesday,

increasing the strain on hospitals and testing centers across the country.

In New South Wales, Australia's most-populous state, 23,131 new cases were reported, an increase on the record of 22,577 cases on New Year's Day. There were 1,344 people in hospitals, up 140 on the previous day and 78 more than the record previously set in late September. The new cases were detected from 83,376 tests, a positivity rate of 28%.

Victoria state reported 14,020 cases on Tuesday, eclipsing the record of 8,577 set on Monday. There were 516 people in hospitals, including 108 in intensive care.

The numbers do not necessarily reflect the true spread of the virus as they only include the number of recorded cases.

The new numbers, however, confirm that Australia has passed the milestone of 500,000 COVID-19 cases.

New South Wales Chief Medical Officer Kerry Chant on Monday urged people not to seek hospital treatment unless absolutely necessary.

"It is important that we all play our part in not placing unnecessary burden on the health system," she said.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Monday rejected calls for the federal government to make rapid antigen tests free.

"We're now in a stage of the pandemic where you can't just make everything free," Morrison said on Monday. "When someone tells you they want to make something free, someone's always going to pay for it, and it's going to be you."

Testing centers were forced to close in New South Wales, Victoria and

Queensland again on Tuesday either because of staff shortages or because laboratories which process the results are at capacity despite working 24/7.

In Victoria, where one in four tests was positive, 54 testing sites run by private companies closed on Monday.

"They're disappointed to have to do this but they're doing a pragmatic thing to safeguard their own systems and to make sure the labs can get back on top of their workload," Victoria COVID-19 Response Commander Jeroen Weimar said.

Australian Medical Association Vice President Chris Moy said in hospitals large numbers of healthcare workers have been furloughed after contracting the virus, making it difficult for remaining workers to provide adequate patient care.

"You have this double-whammy of lots of patients and also staff being furloughed at the same time," Moy told ABC Radio.

South Australia, Queensland and the island state of Tasmania all reported record case numbers Tuesday.

Queensland reported 5,699 new cases, taking the number of active cases in the state past 25,000.

Chief Health Officer John Gerrard said with around 23% of tests being positive, those numbers will rise.

"The numbers of cases we are expected to see through January will be very high, certainly in the hundreds of thousands, if not more, in Queensland, very high," Gerrard said.

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