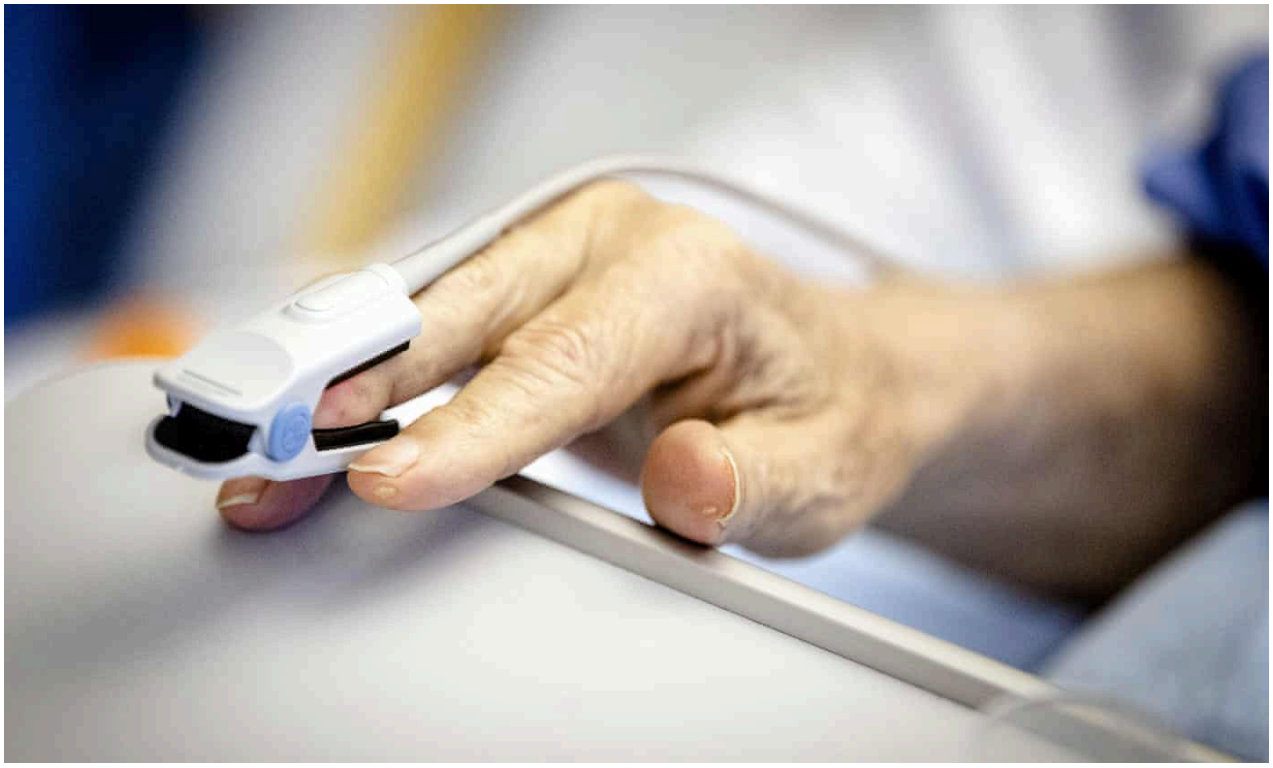
Health

‘If I’d known, I would have got it’: on the frontline of Australia’s ‘pandemic of the unvaccinated’



Some unvaccinated patients, sick or dying of Covid, are realising too late they should have got the jab, doctors and nurses say. Photograph: Hollandse Hoogte/Rex/Shutterstock

Cait Kelly *and* Tory Shepherd

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An unvaccinated patient lies on a hospital bed. Sick, dying of Covid, realising too late they should have got the jab.

Another, ill and panicking, asks if they can get the vaccination now. It’s too late, the doctor has to tell them.

Yet another, gasping for air, can’t even find the breath to ask.

This is what Australia’s doctors and nurses are dealing with, on the frontline of the “pandemic of the unvaccinated”. People

realising the severity of their error, the outcomes of believing the misinformation that has been spread about vaccines, and the existence of Covid itself.

Others are too far down the rabbit hole to even have that Damascene conversion. A Sydney nurse tells Guardian Australia of a man who didn't believe Covid was real even as he lay in a hospital bed.

"This guy just kept trying to escape, he wasn't on the breathing machine yet, he was like, 'Covid is not real. I don't know why I'm here'," the nurse says.

"He would go to walk out, he would make it five metres and he would have to sit on the floor. And we'd offer him oxygen and say, 'maybe you don't believe in it, man, but you're not well,' and while he was feeling defeated we'd get him back to bed.

"Then we'd give him medication so he would be feeling better and the circus would start all over again."

Then there are the family members, pressuring doctors to prescribe bogus medicines they have heard about online. The nurse says while patients are in the ICU, families might be "trying to go toe to toe" over the phone with the registrar, pushing some unproven treatment.

Australia has long had its share of anti-vaxxers spreading misinformation. Much of the movement dates back to Andrew Wakefield, who falsely linked childhood vaccinations to autism. He was entirely discredited, but is still actively promoting misinformation.

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Now, those who believe in a wide range of conspiracy theories have found new audiences online, and merged in a strange melange with parts of the wellness industry. They've been fuelled by celebrities, and by politicians.

The former US president Donald Trump repeated the false claim about a link with autism, although he got the Covid vaccine. Then he notoriously undermined the science by spruiking unproven treatments (including bleach, ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine, none of which work).

Bogus treatments giving false hope, the rejection of public health measures on the basis of "freedom", and incorrect information have all led people away from the proven health advice, which is that vaccination is safe, works, and saves lives.

The misinformation sprouted in Australia, amplified by politicians including the Liberal MP Gerard Rennick, LNP MP George Christensen and United Australia party MP Craig Kelly.

It's the country's health system that is bearing the consequences.

'Doctors have to tell them it's too late'

A nurse in a regional New South Wales hospital says it's frustrating and upsetting seeing sick, unvaccinated people.

"We're quite upset that people have chosen not to get vaccinated because of misleading information and we're on the frontline, having to nurse them. Wearing personal protective equipment, it's not fun, it's not comfortable ... it's a drain on resources," she says.

The Australian Medical Association vice-president, Dr Chris

The Australian Medical Association vice-president, Dr Chris Moy, says health workers are professionals, who will naturally show compassion to any patient.

That doesn't stop the frustration, as the exhausted workforce deals with the extra burden of people who deny the science.

"People are saying 'please give me the vaccine', and doctors have to tell them it's too late," Moy says.

"There's definitely no 'I told you so', and they will be compassionate to that individual, but nevertheless they would wish that those individuals had been able to talk to their past selves. To get past the thinking, whatever it was that led to the decision to not get vaccinated.

"On a personal level it's frustrating, trying very hard to give proper scientific information to people so they can hopefully make a decision to get vaccinated, not just for themselves but to protect others. And at the same time we're getting attacked."

Nearly 90% of Australians over 16 are fully vaccinated, and hesitancy is dropping. The University of Melbourne, via its Melbourne Institute, reports that only 6.4% of Australians are now "vaccine hesitant".

But in that cohort, there is a firmly belligerent rump. Thousands of people have attended so-called "freedom" rallies, protesting a grab bag of Covid issues. Politicians, scientists and health workers around the world have been threatened for their work on vaccinations.

> **They ask for the vaccine, and the doctors say it's too late**

And, while some dislike the phrase "pandemic of the unvaccinated" because the vaccinated can still get sick, the latest NSW statistics show they are the minority of cases. About 85% of deaths, and 94% of

intensive care admissions are those who are not fully vaccinated. And the vast majority of cases are in those who have not had any vaccinations at all.

Tim Leong, the service director at Monash Health's intensive care unit, says he's looked at the numbers across Melbourne's major hospitals.

"It's by far and away a pandemic of the unvaccinated. We can get data on who in the ICU with Covid is double vaccinated, and it's one patient," he says.

"All the rest are not vaccinated. That in itself tells the story."

The Royal Melbourne hospital ICU director, Chris MacIsaac, echoes Leong. He says 95% of their patients are not fully vaccinated and there are cases where patients - and their loved ones - have been misinformed.

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"They require an extensive period of time and discussion to help them understand," he says.

Leong says by the time patients reach the ICU, they're gasping for breath: "They're often confused, they're beyond that (asking for the vaccine).

"There's been the occasional patient who said: 'If I'd known, I

would have got it.' Mostly I've seen people who say: 'I'm really scared, I'm really suffering, why can't I breathe, I feel like I'm dying.' That's what they're thinking. It's beyond that."

Leong adds that not all the unvaccinated are anti-vax, some have just not got around to it.

‘Not much more they can do’

Dr Karen Price, the president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, says doctors in hospitals are burned out, overworked and exhausted, but they dig deep and find compassion, even when people are playing “Russian roulette” with Covid.

“They’re rolling them on to their tummies so they can breathe, and they ask for the vaccine, and the doctors say it’s too late. At that point there’s not much more they can do,” Price says.

GPs are putting in the hard yards, she says, trying to educate and inform their patients. To build trust, and give people the right information.

It’s appropriate that people ask questions about healthcare, Price says, and GPs have to deal with the challenges that come with vulnerable patients, language barriers, or low health literacy.

“But this is what we do every day,” she says.

Meanwhile, the new front in the vaccination wars and the “freedom” rhetoric is about mandates. The anti-mandate warriors are not explicitly anti-vaccination - indeed, some say they support vaccination but don’t think they should be mandatory - but they are appealing to those who are.

In November, five government senators crossed the floor to vote with One Nation on an anti-vaccination mandate bill.

Rennick was joined by Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Matt Canavan and Sam McMahon trying to stop discrimination based on Covid vaccination status.

Also with them was Liberal senator Alex Antic. Antic is refusing to confirm or deny whether he is vaccinated. On his return to Adelaide from Canberra on Thursday, he was whisked into

Adelaide from Canberra on Thursday, he was whisked into hotel quarantine for two weeks. Vaccinated arrivals from low-risk areas including Canberra do not have to quarantine.

The discovery of a new variant, Omicron, has further complicated the situation.

But, despite some of the unknowns about Omicron, health authorities say the best thing you can do to protect yourself, and others, is to get vaccinated.

The nurse in regional NSW says she's haunted by one unvaccinated patient.

"All I think about is that young man, before we tubed him, asking him: 'Do you want to ring your son, it might be the last time you might speak to him?' He didn't have the energy. He could only speak basic words," she says.

"He got sent to Melbourne, he has gone on the ECMO [the extracorporeal membrane oxygenation machine, to oxygenate the blood]. You have to be pretty lucky to come off the ECMO.

"I would tell people to just get vaccinated," she says.

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