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MEDIA RELEASE

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Data shows protecting healthcare workers is more complex than PPE supply

Health and aged care services must double down on statewide, mandatory and strategic measures to protect nurses, midwives and personal care workers from contracting COVID-19 in the workplace.

Data analysis of healthcare workers who contracted COVID-19 in the second outbreak shows the vast majority of healthcare workers who tested positive, 955 or 42 per cent, were from private aged care.

The Department of Health and Human Services says that 27 per cent of these aged care healthcare workers were nurses who worked in private aged care including those who went in to help when a number of facilities fell over.

In hospitals, nurses made up approximately 70 per cent of the health professionals who tested positive.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (Victorian Branch) is on the new healthcare worker infection and wellbeing taskforce which is meeting weekly to reduce and prevent the spread of the virus through the workforce.

The diverse representation of all of the impacted healthcare professionals, executives, infection control specialists, educators, WorkSafe and the health department decision makers mean the taskforce can really make a difference.

ANMF will work with the Victorian Government, Worksafe, employers and our members to respond to what the data is telling us about transmission

ANMF (Vic Branch) Secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick said 'Nurses and aged care personal care worker have really felt the brunt of this second wave.

'They are stretched and so many are worried about contracting the virus at work or giving it to their family.

'There is one thing the Andrews Government can't do but Prime Minister Scott Morrison can, which is to mandate that private aged care providers must introduce ratios in private aged care.

'The Prime Minister must also ensure they also ramp up the number of registered nurses within those ratios on every shift to improve infection control measures to protect aged care workers and residents.

'There are so few registered nurses working in private aged care not because there is a shortage, but because so few are employed in this sector.

'While those numbers remain alarmingly low – others don't wish to work in these facilities,' Ms Fitzpatrick said.

'The data reveals important lessons that tell us multiple and complex factors – PPE training, donning and doffing safely, cohorting of positive patients, the space between patients, ventilation in older buildings, and how staff amenities are used - are contributing to the transmission,' she said.

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'Unfortunately, the recent and sometimes hysterical discussion about supply of PPE drowned out the equally important message about using PPE safely and following infection control procedures and which is a much more complex and nuanced.

'Masks are a significant part of the solution, but you must have safe systems and infection control procedures in place as well.

'All the good is undone if you take that N95 mask off the wrong way,' Ms Fitzpatrick said.

'Importantly the critical work which will advise whether the transmission was staff to staff member or patient to staff member is yet to be finalized but will be further piece of work that can inform the work of the taskforce.

'Work is well underway implementing measures to protect nurses, midwives, personal care workers and all other healthcare workers and we're grateful to Victorians for their role in driving down community transmission.

'Nurses and midwives will be pleased that their WorkCover claims will be fast-tracked and it's important to note we're not aware that any healthcare worker's claim has been rejected,' she said.

'ANMF understands the fast-tracking of WorkCover claims will also apply to private aged care personal care workers and is seeking confirmation.

'Our work is also to ensure that student nurses and midwives on clinical placement have the protection of WorkCover and don't fall through the cracks because they technically don't have an employer,' Ms Fitzpatrick said.

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