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URGENT ACTION NEEDED ON HOTEL QUARANTINE

The latest cases of COVID-19 transmission in Victoria are yet another failure of infection control systems in hotel quarantine and show the need for urgent action nationally, AMA President Dr Omar Khorshid said today.

The Holiday Inn at Melbourne Airport has been evacuated and more than 950 hotel quarantine workers are in self-isolation after two new cases were identified yesterday.

“This new, more infectious UK strain has blown open cracks in our hotel quarantine system, putting the nation at risk,” Dr Khorshid said.

“It’s most likely that these cases are the result of airborne spread, yet the experts advising Government, the Infection Control Expert Group (ICEG), have continually played down airborne transmission in the spread of the virus in hotel and healthcare settings.

“The AMA and much of the wider medical profession have been calling for better responses to the risk of airborne spread of COVID-19 for months.

“Today’s news regarding the Holiday Inn is more evidence that these calls should have been heeded earlier.

“The virus has now escaped hotel quarantine arrangements in most States, and we are incredibly lucky to have not yet seen a mass outbreak of one of these new, more transmissible strains.

“It’s clear that the protections afforded to healthcare workers in some states must be extended to all hotel quarantine workers – they are at the front lines of facing these new strains.

“Last September, Minister Hunt committed to reviewing guidelines for protecting healthcare workers from COVID-19, announcing a partnership between ICEG and the National COVID-19 Evidence Taskforce, specifically focussing on the question of airborne spread.

“It’s been almost six months and Infection Prevention and Control Panel is yet to produce the goods. We cannot wait any longer for ICEG to act.

“It is clear, as the AMA raised in our appearance at the recent Senate inquiry, that ICEG has failed in its duties to date.

“Ministers, through National Cabinet, need to act and act now. Anyone involved in hotel quarantine and all healthcare workers must be protected from all methods of SARS Cov-2 spread in any situation where there are possible, suspected, likely or confirmed cases of infection.

“Smart changes need to be made to airflow in facilities, and better personal protective equipment (PPE) including N95 masks and eye protection for workers in hotel quarantine.

“If hotels cannot be made safe through PPE and other controls, alternatives must be found now that will allow some travel in and out of Australia whilst protecting all Australians from this virus, including the new strains.

“There have been too many hotel quarantine breaches, and lives are being put at risk.

“We need action now.”

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