

# New weekly COVID reporting is 'useless'

**Tom Burton** *Government editor*



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The new national weekly COVID-19 reporting regime has been heavily criticised, with claims it is a mishmash of different measures, definitions and timings, with some jurisdictions not reporting testing and with the new federal report replaced by a “useless” PowerPoint document.

The criticisms came after the nation’s chief health officers decided to move to weekly reporting rather than daily reporting of COVID-19. Federal Health Minister Mark Butler promised the change would ensure “high quality accurate information is provided that sheds more light on COVID dynamics”.

He said the new approach would bring “national reporting in line with all the states and territories.”

The new weekly reports from the states and the Commonwealth were highly anticipated by data analysts who have been forced to track the pandemic by scraping data from the various daily website reports.

But there was collective disappointment as each jurisdiction dribbled out differing reports on Friday, with the federal Health department finally publishing at around 4.35pm after IT issues.

“Federal dashboard is gone, replaced by a report that’s fairly useless,” popular Twitter analyst and COVID-19 cartographer [@dbRaevn](https://twitter.com/dbRaevn) [https://twitter.com/dbRaevn] said.



Federal Health Minister Mark Butler promised new weekly reporting of COVID would ensure “high quality accurate information” to track the pandemic. **Luis Asculi**

Anthony Macali, the founder of Covidlive [<https://covidlive.com.au/>], the go-to site for many epidemiologists and public health officials, described the new weekly reporting as “messy”.



He noted the new federal report

[[https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/09/covid-19-weekly-trends-report\\_0.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/09/covid-19-weekly-trends-report_0.pdf)] had reverted to being in PDF format. This means there are no aggregated numbers in a modern machine-readable format, leaving data analysts to have to scrape data from the PDFs.

“@healthgovau [<https://twitter.com/healthgovau>] [the federal health department] only updated the Federal health dashboard page a month ago ... and it was so much better,” Mr Macali said.

dbRaevn also noted the federal report had only graphs of fatalities, rather than the actual numbers, limiting data scientists ability to analyse the data.

He noted most states, except Queensland reported fatality numbers up to the Thursday, meaning they could have been easily incorporated into the national Friday report.

Queensland unilaterally decided not to include any testing data, making it impossible to understand key clinical metrics such as testing positivity and case to fatality measure.

Nor was any testing data included in the national report, despite PCR testing data being published in another weekly report produced by the same department called the Common Operating Picture

[\[https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/09/coronavirus-covid-19-common-operating-picture-13-september-2022.pdf\]](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/09/coronavirus-covid-19-common-operating-picture-13-september-2022.pdf).

Analysts noted the mishmash of different timing periods and clinical definitions made it difficult to show trends in any consistent way.

“@qldhealth [\[https://twitter.com/qldhealth\]](https://twitter.com/qldhealth) [Queensland department of Health] have simplified their infographic,” Mr Macali noted

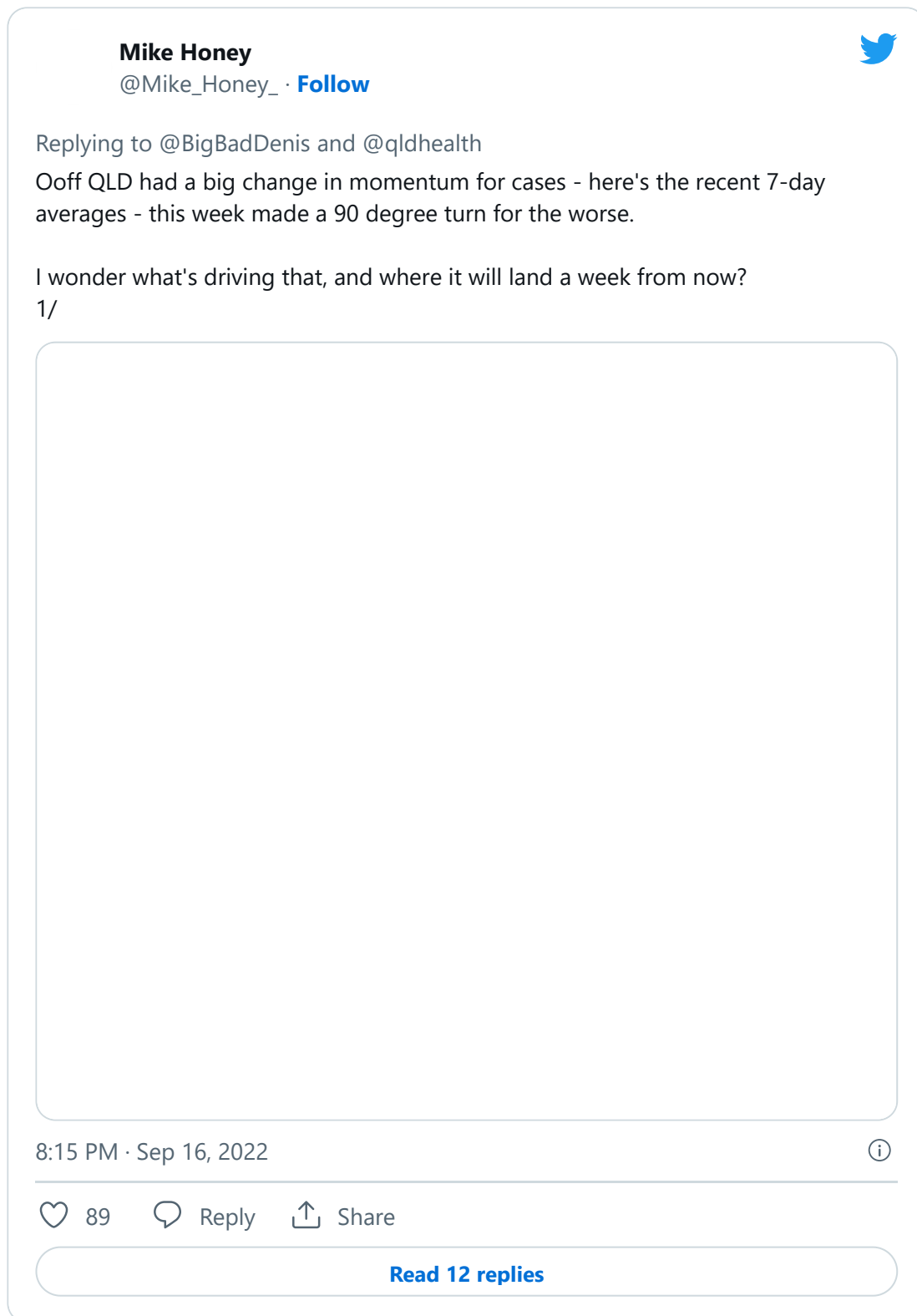
“RATs [rapid antigen tests] are no longer reported. Unfortunately information relating to testing, location and age has been removed. They also have a weekly reporting window of 6 Sept to 13 Sep.”

Other states reported up to September 15.

Queensland added to the confusion on Friday when it published two different case numbers. It initially published on the departmental health website that there had been 2280 cases over the seven-day reporting period. This was later updated to 10,009 cases.

This means that Queensland saw a rapid up tick in cases over the period with the seven-day daily case average moving from 1058 to 1430, according to data analyst Mike Honey.

“QLD had a big change in momentum for cases .... this week made a 90-degree turn for the worse,” Mr Honey said, noting that “no other Australian state changed direction noticeably on a 7-day average basis.”



At the same time, dbRaeven observed the federal PowerPoint dashboard used a variety of reporting periods. This makes it difficult to build consistent key metrics such as the proportion of hospitalisations to cases.

For the federal report, average daily cases were for week ending on Tuesday, weekly hospital and ICU figures were up to Wednesday, while ventilation figures were reported for the week ending on Sunday.

NSW and Victoria continue to report data at postcode and local government level which gives important intelligence about where the spread of cases is. But Queensland has decided not to publish this data any more meaning it is no longer possible to get a national locational perspective of where the virus is prevalent.

Analysts had hoped the weekly reports would continue to break numbers down by day enabling the current reporting trends, such as the important seven-day average of daily cases, to continue to be reported.

However, only Western Australia published their daily case data rendering useless the future of over two years of national trend data based on daily reporting.

Despite promises by Mr Butler of high quality accurate data that will bring national reporting into line with the states there still remain inconsistent reporting of how the states and territories report hospital data.

This means NSW is reporting hospitalisation rates five times that of Victoria on a like-for-like basis.

The Northern Territory decided not to publish ICU data.

Monash University physics professor Michael Fuhrer also called into question [<https://twitter.com/MichaelSFuhrer/status/1570972736629116928?s=20&t=gYB78yAx9sKbGxkBWXXUObrnZnsBA36HLWOj8HmLp48>] some of the vaccination reporting. He noted the Victoria Chief health officer Professor Brett Sutton was claiming [<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/media-releases/chief-health-officer-update-16-september-2022>] as of Friday that 45 per cent of COVID deaths in Victoria in the last three months were unvaccinated.

He said this compared to about 17 per cent of people dying from COVID in NSW being unvaccinated. Professor Fuhrer said the Victoria unvaccinated death rate was about three times that of New Zealand.

Melbourne University epidemiologist Professor Tony Blakely said the promised national centre for disease control [<https://www.afr.com/policy/health-and-education/the-truths-an-australian-disease-control-agency-must-face-20220815-p5b9yq>] would provide better data analysis and co-ordination.

“We are pretty poor in Australia in our ability to do rapid data analysis. That type of agency will be critical,” Professor Blakely said.

In the US, the highly respected and popular John Hopkin’s university COVID reporting site [<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>] is no longer going to report testing data, claiming the PCR and RAT reports from the states are too inconsistent and unreliable.

It is also moving from reporting data by the hour to daily reporting.

World Health Organisation director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus last Thursday declared “the end is in sight” for the pandemic, but that now was not the time to ease up on infection control measures.



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“We have never been in a better position to end the pandemic,” Dr Tedros said.  
“We’re not there yet, but the end is in sight.”

Most infection control experts are watching how the northern winter plays out, with hopes there is not a repeat of the winter waves seen in the southern hemisphere over past months.

A number of variants and so-called second generation

[<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/omicron-returns-with-vengeance-20220711-p5b0n0>] variants (a sub variant that mutates) are being closely watched but with a hope none will gain enough ascendancy to fuel case loads and another wave.

Professor Sutton recently warned of the likelihood of another wave of cases this year [<https://www.afr.com/policy/health-and-education/another-omicron-wave-before-year-s-end-victorian-health-chief-predicts-20220905-p5bfgu>] due to waning vaccination and infection immunity.

**Tom Burton** has held senior editorial and publishing roles with The Mandarin, The Sydney Morning Herald and as Canberra bureau chief for The Australian Financial Review. He has won three Walkley awards. *Connect with Tom on [Twitter](#). Email Tom at [tom.burton@afrr.com](mailto:tom.burton@afrr.com)*