

'COVID soup' fuelling longer infection wave

Tom Burton *Government editor*



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Hopes of a short, sharp coronavirus wave are being thwarted by a concoction of omicron subvariants driving a national patchwork of COVID-19 outbreaks, and hospital admissions and anti-viral prescriptions are the highest since the winter wave in August.

Nationally cases have lifted again for the sixth consecutive week, with a 20 per cent rise from the previous week, with Tasmania (up 46 per cent), ACT (up 35 per cent) and the Northern Territory (up 114 per cent) recording the highest case increases.

This is a longer case upswing than has occurred in Singapore and France.



Ambulance Victoria called a code red on Friday night. **Wayne Taylor**

Adjusted for unreported RAT tests

[[https://twitter.com/dbRaevn/status/1598858285121429504?](https://twitter.com/dbRaevn/status/1598858285121429504?s=20&t=vU4Hc2B7NwFGpc5LzikFeA)

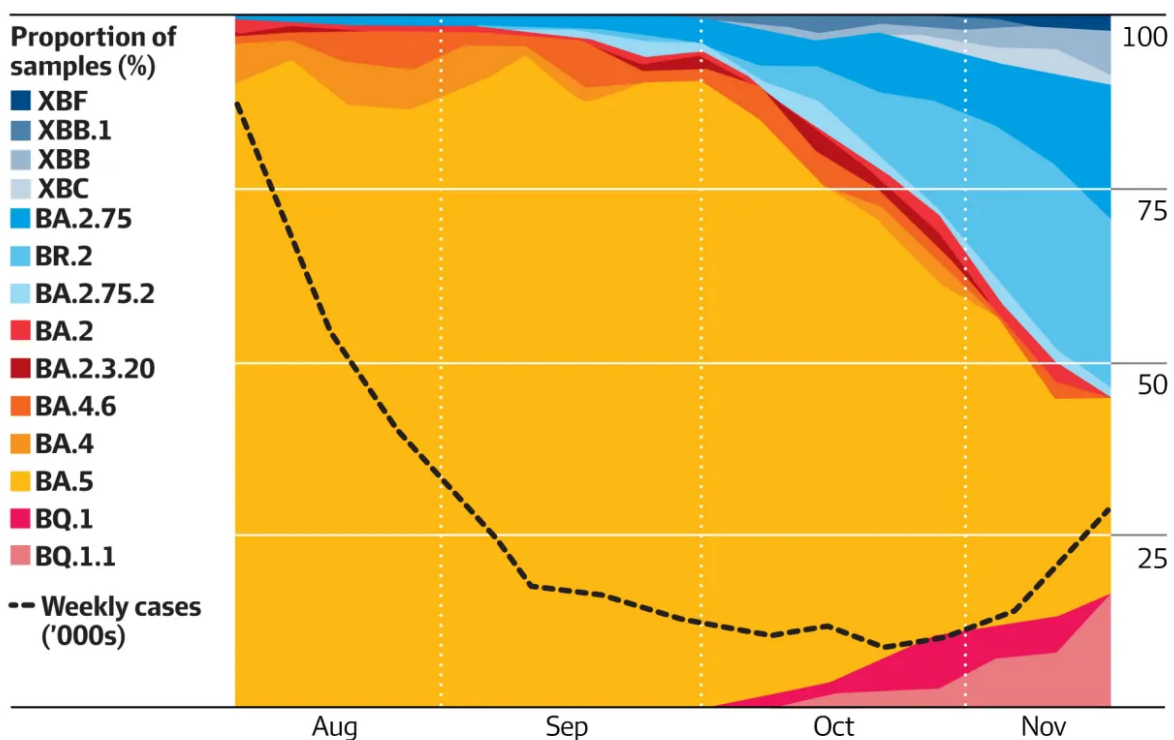
s=20&t=vU4Hc2B7NwFGpc5LzikFeA], NSW late last week recorded its highest level of daily cases since early August, with “test positivity” at 20 per cent, similar to the peak of the winter wave. High test positivity suggests the prevalence of disease is not being accurately reported.

Across the country there is a variety of coronavirus sub-variants fighting for dominance, fuelling different health outcomes and localised outbreaks. Sewer surveillance across Sydney shows spikes in Liverpool but falls in Bondi.

In Tasmania about half of hospital admissions are COVID-related.

In Melbourne, data analyst Mike Honey said the outer Melbourne Frankston region had reported an extremely high case rate of 1315 per 100,000 head of population for the week, accounting for nearly 10 per cent of Victoria’s cases.

Various COVID-19 variants prevalent in NSW



SOURCE: NSW HEALTH

Fast-rising COVID hospital admissions saw Victoria’s ambulance system declare a code red emergency on Friday evening and hospital emergency levels lifted to level three.

Federal chief medical officer Paul Kelly predicted last month

[<https://www.afr.com/politics/covid-19-wave-to-peak-soon-and-drop-sharply-20221115-p5bygl>]

that cases would “peak soon and drop quickly”, suggesting that the case wave would be “short and sharp”.

However, epidemiologists and virologists [<https://virological.org/t/sars-cov-2-evolution-post-omicron/911>] say a soup of different sub-variants is causing un-synchronised outbreaks across the country. Rather than a short, sharp wave, Australia is seeing a slower, longer wave.

Mr Honey has been tracking variants and reported that as of Sunday at least three subvariants of the omicron variant were driving infection numbers. He said the BQ subvariant was being detected in 25 per cent of NSW sequences but the XBF subvariant was beginning to dominate in Victoria (22 per cent). In Tasmania, the BR2.1 variant represented 16 per cent of cases.

UNSW Associate Professor John Wood still predicts a peak before Christmas but said the “explosion” in omicron variants could mark an important turning point in the disease.

“If you are infected with one of these new variants, you should also have strong protection to the rest of the soup. The absence of big mutational jumps in dominant variants suggests SARS-CoV2, the virus that causes COVID, may now be entering a period of slower, more continuous evolution. This is what we see for seasonal influenza.”

His analysis is supported by Dr Tom Peacock, an eminent virologist from Imperial College London, who said in a new paper [<https://virological.org/t/sars-cov-2-evolution-post-omicron/911>] that rather than a discrete new wave of mutations “we’ve seen huge diversification of lineages”.

He said it was unclear what this meant for the epidemiology of the virus.

“I guess bottom line is the virus is continuing to evolve pretty rapidly, we don’t really understand what impact that’s going to have over the next few months though.”

“It doesn’t *appear* to be driving huge waves in places that have previously had lots of Omicron (ie Europe/US) but never want to make predictions.”

Deakin University epidemiology chair Professor Catherine Bennett used an ocean metaphor to describe the current situation.

“We are not seeing big waves crashing, just an ocean in constant motion. We are less likely to see big waves as long as we don’t get a new variant.”

“These large number of subvariants – the soup – are taking the shock out of it. The subvariants are out of sync, one keeps rolling over the other.

“It means you won’t get these large swings of cases or virulence, but the downside is you can’t get rid of it. People will still get sick.”

Karen Cutter has been leading the Actuaries Institute mortality analysis

[<https://www.actuaries.digital/2022/11/04/covid-19-mortality-working-group-another-month-of-high-excess-mortality-in-july-2022/>] for Covid and has been closely watching the numbers for this wave. She is sceptical the peak has been reached.

“We haven’t seen any evidence of plateauing yet,” Ms Cutter tweeted Saturday.

“If it is going to be short/sharp, then we should see an improvement in the stats next Friday’s, or perhaps the week after. Do I think it is likely? Ummmm....no comment.”



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