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Call to end private hospital restrictions as delayed healthcare threatens ‘shadow pandemic’ in Victoria

Exclusive new data has revealed the alarming impact of government mandated hospital lockdown restrictions in Victoria.

New research by Members Health, the peak body for Australia’s not-for-profit and member owned health insurers, has revealed massive declines in the number of eligibility checks for serious health conditions, putting the Victorian public at risk of a sinister shadow pandemic.

“The data we are seeing is unprecedented in Australia and signals an avalanche of complex and very serious health conditions on the way,” warned Members Health CEO Matthew Koce.

“The longer the Victorian Government locks down our private hospitals, the worse things will get for people’s health and wellbeing.

“Living in pain and on powerful medication, with the added uncertainty of not knowing when surgery is going to resume, is having a crushing impact on people’s mental health and on their quality of life.”

At the end of October, eligibility checks for skin-related procedures, such as time-critical removal of skin cancers had slumped 21 per cent, according to Members Health’s research. Checks relating to kidney and bladder procedures had dropped 25 per cent; gynaecology related checks had decreased 34 per cent; gastrointestinal endoscopy checks had declined 25 per cent; and heart and vascular related checks had fallen 11 per cent. Cataracts experienced the biggest hit, plummeting by a massive 52% from normal levels.

Eligibility checks clinical categories Victoria as at 30 October 2021

Percentages represent current levels of eligibility checks as compared to normal levels (100%)

Gastrointestinal endoscopy	Heart and vascular system	Cataracts	Bone, joint and muscle	Kidney and bladder	Digestive system	Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and immunotherapy for cancer	Pain management	Skin	Gynaecology	Hospital psychiatric services
75%	89%	48%	54%	75%	71%	105%	76%	79%	66%	100%

But Members Health’s eligibility checks research did reveal one bright spot, Mr Koce said.

“Checks for chemotherapy, radiotherapy and immunotherapy for cancer have defied the wider decline, which is promising for future demand on those services,” he said.

Eligibility checks are a leading indicator of current and future healthcare demand. Hospitals conduct checks with health insurers to determine patient eligibility to private health benefits prior to admission. Members Health’s research collated data from 22 individual health insurers covering over 3 million lives.

“Victoria’s elective surgery lockdown means people being unable to see properly; people managing pain with strong opioids; people missing out on quality time with friends and family, and; the likelihood of surgery becoming more complex and a higher risk of poorer clinical outcomes,” Mr Koce said.

Putting members’ health before profit

“The consequences of these draconian restrictions for people’s health and wellbeing are simply not worth it and can no longer be justified as being ‘in the public interest’.

“Delays in treatment also have a profound impact on mental health. The fact that psychiatric services have rebounded so quickly to 100 per cent is even more evidence of the toll this pandemic and these hospital restrictions are having on many Australians’ mental health.”

NSW lifted all its private hospital day and overnight restrictions on elective surgery last month, when they reached the 80 per cent double vaccination milestone. Mr Koce urged the Victorian Government to do the same.

The vast majority of the [83 overnight-stay private hospitals and all the 105 private day procedure clinics](#) across Victoria, which remain under these harsh restrictions, are not equipped to admit or treat patients with COVID-19.

"It beggars belief why such indiscriminate restrictions are being applied to health facilities, which provide such critical care for so many Australians and represent such a minimal risk of exposure to the virus," Mr Koce said.

“Victorians are doing their bit. They have exceeded the 80 per cent double vax milestone, so the Government must remove the shackles on private hospitals and allow people to get the care they so urgently need, or risk triggering a massive shadow pandemic.

“Fully vaccinated people can go for a coffee, see a movie, meet with friends and head back to the office. But for those waiting in agony for elective surgery, there is no relief in sight.

“The Government must get out of the way, end what is effectively a takeover of the private hospital system and allow all private hospital elective surgery to resume immediately.”

Members Health is the peak industry body for an alliance of 26 health funds that are not-for-profit or part of a member-owned group. They all share the common ethic of putting their members’ health before profit. Our funds represent the interests of more than 3.9 million Australians.

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