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Isolation rules may be cut to five days

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Treasurer Josh Frydenberg has signalled COVID-19 isolation requirements could be cut to as little as five days in Australia, helping stem growing staff shortages and limit further disruption to the economic recovery.

As Australia recorded 77 deaths yesterday – the highest daily death toll since the start of the pandemic crisis – a

shortage of rapid tests and growing case numbers have hit consumer confidence and forced thousands of workers to stay home.

Mr Frydenberg said isolation rules were under constant

review, suggesting national cabinet or the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee could soon move to shorten stay-at-home periods.

Victoria and NSW are among states which have cut isolation rules for COVID-infected people from two weeks to 10 days, while the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has moved to a five-day isolation mandate.

Under growing political pressure, UK

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson is reportedly considering permanently abolishing all isolation for positive cases.

In Australia, some workers in food and grocery, warehousing and transport sectors can already return to work if they are without virus symptoms and test negative. But the hard-hit hospital and retail sectors have not seen requirements eased.

While Health Minister Greg Hunt said there was no current proposal for zero isolation for infected people in Australia, the Treasurer pledged health settings would remain “pragmatic and proportionate”.

“The chief medical officers continue

to work through these issues,” Mr Frydenberg said during a visit to a logistics hub in Melbourne.

“I do note that a number of other countries around the world have actually reduced the isolation requirements, even for those who have tested positive, from seven or 10 days, down to five days.

“It’s never set and forget. The government will do everything possible to help support the Australian community on both the health and the economic front.”

NSW recorded 36 deaths yesterday, while Victoria reported 22. There were 16 deaths in Queensland, two in South Australia and one in the ACT.

More than 530 people have died so far in 2022, with current fatalities easily outpacing last year’s delta wave.

Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly said consideration of isolation requirements were ongoing. He believes case numbers are peaking in some parts of Australia.

“It is a decision of balance. It’s a decision about workforces and a trade-off with increased transmission in the community,” he said.

“The more you go down that path of shorter isolation periods, the higher the risk of having transmission in the community. That’s very clear.”

Mr Hunt said the government was reactivating an agreement with private hospitals for staff to work in the strained public system, set to allow about 57,000 nurses and more than 100,000 staff to help meet surging demand.

Moves to reopen access to the national medical stockpile will allow 10 million units of personal protective equipment to be released.

Business groups welcomed consideration of less onerous isolation rules, as Immigration Minister Alex Hawke said 43,000 international students and 8000 skilled workers had arrived in Australia since border rules eased.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry boss Andrew McKellar said isolation requirements should be further eased.

“Until close contact isolation requirements are relaxed for all workers, businesses will continually be forced to close or significantly reduce

their operating capacity,” he said.

“It is likely that national cabinet will need to revisit close contact isolation protocols as long as acute staff absenteeism continues.

“No matter how many workers are exempt from isolation requirements, the biggest issue at the moment is the supply of rapid antigen testing. Severe shortages of tests means that many employees in these critical sectors will still be unable to fulfil requirements to return to work.”

ACTU secretary Sally McManus this week threatened strikes if employers did not ramp up workplace safety in response to omicron, accusing some employers of “making people go to work when they’re sick”.

Australian Mines and Metals Association chief executive Steve Knott said the ACTU concerns stood in contrast with unions being “extremely difficult when it comes to employers requiring all their employees to be vaccinated, which is the best available tool we have to keep people healthy and safe”.

“By having a sook about employer-led vaccination efforts, including vaccination mandates and now undermining critical worker protocols agreed at national cabinet, the ACTU are effectively undermining the co-ordinated efforts of business and government to keep Australian’s employed and businesses operating,” he said.

But Finance Sector Union national secretary Julia Angrisano backed the ACTU’s calls and raised concerns about the safety standards in the banking industry.

She said a major bank branch in NSW, which she did not name, closed recently due to positive cases among staff. Close contacts who tested negative were sent to relieve shortages at another branch, where there was a subsequent outbreak. Then staff at that branch were sent to relieve a third branch where another employee developed COVID-19.

“A better course of action would have been to send close contacts home,” she said. “I am very concerned for our members and all front-line bank workers. Bank staff are essential workers but once again they are not being provided with the tools to do their jobs safely.”



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Josh Frydenberg: "It's never set and forget." PHOTO: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN