

Should Australia's COVID19 quarantine centres be located away from major cities?

What they said...

'I believe it's well and truly time to move quarantine to remote locations, to reduce the risk of transmission into dense urban areas'

Adrian Esterman, Professor of Biostatistics and Epidemiology at the University of South Australia

'Does the facility need to be in a remote area? No. It makes it too hard to have skilled staff, health expertise and access to acute hospitals...'

Catherine Bennett, the chair in epidemiology at Deakin University

The issue at a glance

On February 15, 2021, the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, announced that the state would build a standalone quarantine facility to accommodate some of those returning to Australia from overseas, suggesting either Melbourne or Avalon airports as possible locations. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/16/melbourne-covid-hotel-evacuated-due-to-water-damage-as-victoria-reports-two-new-cases>

In January 2021, the Queensland premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, stated her government's continued enthusiasm for the establishment of remote quarantine facilities in her state. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-22/coronavirus-qld-hotel-quarantine-mining-camps-national-cabinet/13080260> The Queensland premier had sought unsuccessfully to promote such a scheme on a national basis to the National Cabinet set up to co-ordinate Australia's response to COVID19. New South Wales expressed no interest <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/states-reject-queensland-s-push-for-international-arrivals-to-be-quarantined-in-remote-camps> and the prime minister, Scott Morrison, declared his lack of support for the proposal.

<https://www.news.com.au/national/calls-for-changes-to-australias-hotel-quarantine-arrangements-as-mutant-coronavirus-strains-spread/news-story/33e8760b67f2fe9e7463c6059780a25e>

Despite this the federal government continues to fund and expand the Howard Spring's remote quarantine facility, located south east of Darwin in the Northern Territory.

<https://www.katherinetimes.com.au/story/7081481/howard-springs-quarantine-capacity-boosted/>

The debate over the viability of regional facilities relative to city-based hotel quarantine has not been resolved.

Background

(Much of the information supplied below is abbreviated from the Wikipedia entry titled 'COVID-19 pandemic in Australia'. The full text can be accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Australia)

COVID-19 pandemic in Australia

The COVID-19 pandemic in Australia is part of the ongoing worldwide pandemic of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome

coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first confirmed case in Australia was identified on 25 January 2020, in Victoria, when a man who had returned from Wuhan, China, tested positive for the virus.[2]

Australian borders were closed to all non-residents on 20 March,[3] and returning residents were required to spend two weeks in supervised quarantine hotels from 27 March.[4] Many individual states and territories also closed their borders to varying degrees, with some remaining closed until late 2020,[5] and continuing to periodically close during localised outbreaks.[6] Social distancing rules were imposed on 21 March, and state governments started to close "non-essential" services.[7][8] "Non-essential services" included social gathering venues such as pubs and clubs but unlike many other countries did not include most business operations such as construction, manufacturing and many retail categories.[9] The number of new cases initially grew sharply, then levelled out at about 350 per day around 22 March, and started falling at the beginning of April to under 20 cases per day by the end of the month.[1]

A second wave of infections emerged in Victoria during May and June, which was attributed to an outbreak at a Melbourne quarantine hotel. The second wave, though largely localised to Melbourne, was much more widespread and deadlier than the first; at its peak, the state had over 7,000 active cases.[10] Victoria underwent a second strict lockdown which eventually lasted almost four months.[11] The wave ended with zero new cases being recorded on 26 October.[12][13][14]

As of 24 February 2021, Australia has reported 28,939 cases, 25,486+ recoveries, and 909 deaths, with Victoria's second wave accounting for nearly 75 percent of cases and 90 percent of fatalities.[1] The stated goal of the National Cabinet is "zero community transmission", in contrast to the mitigation strategies implemented by most other nations.[15] Compared to other Western countries, notably the United States and European countries, Australia's handling has been praised for its effectiveness.[16][17][18]

Howard Springs quarantine facility, Northern Territory

An accommodation facility was built at Howard Springs, 29 km south east of the Darwin central business district, in 2012 by Japanese energy company Inpex to accommodate up to 3500 workers. The facility was closed and abandoned in 2018. From early 2020, the facility became a quarantine facility for people returning to Australia from areas infected with COVID-19, initially on 9 February 2020 from Wuhan. The facility has been owned by the Northern Territory Government since 2019 and has been made available to the federal government for quarantine purposes.

It operates under strict protocols. Workers are tested daily and filmed as they don and remove their protective gear to ensure they are doing so safely. There is daily training for all workers and rules that ensure catering staff are always accompanied by clinicians when delivering meals.

There is strict control of entry into the centre and of movement between different sectors. Crews at the international wing are forbidden from crossing over to the domestic, Northern Territory government-run section of Howard Springs and spaces are not shared. Security staff are barred from the 'hot zone', instead tasked with detailing who enters the high-risk parts of the facility and at what times. Repatriated Australians are met by a clinical team at the RAAF base and swabbed on arrival, with

anyone displaying symptoms separated from the group and individually transported to the facility. Anyone who tests positive in quarantine is moved to a section of the facility equipped with a dedicated medical team.

<https://www.ntnews.com.au/news/politics/how-the-experts-prevent-covid19-from-leaking-out-of-darwins-international-quarantine-facility/news-story/5b0e471f96cf0f32a2d4635d5c7d1c1f>

Internet information

On February 17, 2021, In Daily published a report titled 'Spurrier rejects remote quarantine for SA, warning of transmission risk' which details the concerns of South Australia's chief public health officer, Professor Nicola Spurrier, regarding the establishment of a regional quarantine centre in her state.

The full text can be accessed at <https://indaily.com.au/news/2021/02/17/spurrier-rejects-remote-quarantine-for-sa-warning-of-transmission-risk/>

On February 16, 2021, The Courier Mail published a report titled 'John Wagner's plan to home 1000 international returnees' which detailed the consideration being given by the Queensland government in conjunction with businessman John Wager to establishing a regional quarantine hub near Toowoomba.

The full text can be accessed at

<https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/qld-billionaire-john-wagners-plan-to-home-1000-international-returnees/news-story/9cc0ab911bce1c0d5f776b77df9e2ad7>

On February 15, 2021, The New Daily published a report by economist Alan Kohler titled 'What the hell is going on with vaccines and quarantine?' in which Kohler attempted to answer a series of questions, including 'Why have other states not copied what Dr Ian Norton is doing in the Howard Springs quarantine facility in the Northern Territory?'

The full text can be accessed at

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/opinion/2021/02/15/alan-kohler-vaccines-quarantine/>

On February 14, 2021, The Sydney Morning Herald published an article titled "'It's a no-brainer": Experts call for quarantine sites to be moved out of cities' which presents arguments for and against shifting Australia's quarantine facilities to regional centres.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/it-s-a-no-brainer-experts-call-for-quarantine-sites-to-be-moved-out-of-cities-20210213-p5726b.html>

On February 14, 2021, The Age published an article titled 'Experts put poor virus controls in spotlight'. The article gives the view of a member of the Infection Control Expert Group that Victoria's February COVID19 outbreak was the result of poor infection control.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/experts-put-poor-virus-controls-in-spotlight-20210214-p572c0.html>

On February 8, 2021, The Courier published a comment by Adrian Esterman, Professor of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, University of South Australia, titled 'Is it time for quarantine centres to go regional?'. This piece presents several reasons why it would be desirable to establish quarantine centres in regional areas.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/7118417/is-it-time-for-quarantine-centres-to-go-regional/>

On February 8, 2021, BBC News published a report titled 'Covid: Why Australia's "world-class" quarantine system has seen breaches' which examines some of the factors which have led to leaks from hotel quarantine in Australia.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-55929180>

On February 2, 2021, Red Flag published a comment by Ben Hillier titled 'Get the quarantine facilities out of the cities' which presented several arguments for locating quarantine facilities remotely.

The full text can be accessed at <https://redflag.org.au/node/7529>

On February 1, 2021, ABC News published a report titled 'Gladstone Mayor warns of community angst over COVID quarantine facility as letters go unanswered' which detailed some of the local opposition to a regional quarantine facility being established in Queensland.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-01/gladstone-mayor-says-community-opposes-covid-quarantine-facility/13110520>

On February 1, 2021, News GP published a report titled 'Latest hotel quarantine leak proves "we're not learning"' which gives the view of a number of public health experts that Australian states are not learning from previous mistakes made in the nation's hotel quarantine system.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/latest-hotel-quarantine-leak-proves-we-re-not-lear>

On January 30, 2021, The Daily Telegraph published an article titled 'Resident launches petition opposing Calliope quarantine camp' which detailed local opposition to a regional quarantine centre being established in Queensland.

The full text can be accessed at

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/lismore/community/resident-launches-petition-opposing-calliope-quarantine-camp/news-story/1d397cda6dbaf8e34d88ce382e0d2b6e>

On January 21, 2021, ABC News published a report titled 'Scott Morrison's regional Queensland tour overshadowed by talk of COVID quarantine site' in which the Prime Minister was quoted outlining some of the local opposition to the establishment of a regional quarantine centre in Queensland.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-21/pm-scott-morrison-tours-gladstone-central-queensland/13077606>

On January 20, 2021, Farm Online National published a report titled 'National quarantine hub calls for Pacific harvest workers' which details the demands of the New South Wales Agriculture Minister and others that a regional quarantine hub be established to allow agricultural workers from the Pacific Islands to be brought to Australia.

The full text can be accessed at

<https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/7090480/national-quarantine-hub-calls-for-pacific-harvest-workers/>

On January 15, 2021, ABC News published a series of comments from experts arguing for or against establishing more remote quarantine facilities like Howard Springs. The article is titled 'As UK COVID variant spreads, Australia urgently needs more purpose-built quarantine stations, experts say'.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-15/howard-springs-quarantine-facilities-in-other-states-australia/13058438>

On December 4, 2020, News GP published a report titled 'Is it time for a national approach to hotel quarantine?' which gives the view of several public health experts that a more tightly regulated and centrally controlled quarantine system would reduce infection risks in Australia.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/is-it-time-for-a-national-approach-to-hotel-quaran>

On November 23, 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald published an article titled "'Just makes logical sense": Top adviser joins calls to move COVID-19 quarantine out of big cities'. The article presents the views of several disease control experts who want quarantine centres located away from major cities.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/just-makes-logical-sense-top-adviser-joins-calls-to-move-covid-quarantine-out-of-big-cities-20201122-p56gun.html>

On October 23, 2020, the federal Health Department released the National Review of Hotel Quarantine which includes a series of recommendations as to how the quarantine service could be improved.

The full text can be accessed at

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/10/national-review-of-hotel-quarantine.pdf>

On March 27, 2020, ABC News published a report titled 'Coronavirus threat prompts mining companies to implement new procedures to avoid outbreaks' which details the COVID19 control procedures being put in place in Australia's mining camps.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-27/coronavirus-mining-and-resources-new-procedures/12062380>

On March 24, 2020, 7 News published a report titled 'Australian Army to deploy to help in coronavirus fight' which explained some of the ways in which military personnel were being deployed to assist in combatting COVID19.

The full text can be accessed at <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/australian-army-to-deploy-to-help-in-coronavirus-fight-c-759560>

On February 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation' released 'Key considerations for repatriation and quarantine of travellers in relation to the outbreak of novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV', supplying recommendations as to how repatriate citizens and manage quarantine facilities within the countries of returning expatriates.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.who.int/news-room/articles-detail/key-considerations-for-repatriation-and-quarantine-of-travellers-in-relation-to-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>

Arguments in favour of locating quarantine centres away from major cities

1. Locating quarantine centres away from major cities reduces the risk of COVID19 spreading into large populations

Those who support quarantine centres being established away from major cities argue that this is necessary to reduce the risk of contagious diseases, such as COVID19, spreading within large population centres.

Several Australian experts in areas such as disease control have stressed the value of setting up quarantine centres in areas that are removed from major population centres. Adrian Esterman, Professor of Biostatistics and Epidemiology at the University of South Australia, has stated, 'I believe it's well and truly time to move quarantine to remote locations, to reduce the risk of transmission into dense urban areas.'

<https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/7118417/is-it-time-for-quarantine-centres-to-go-regional/> The professor has explained further, 'It's very hard to make a quarantine station 100 percent leak-free. At the end of the day, they're run by humans, who occasionally make mistakes. And SARS-CoV-2 is a very contagious virus.'

<https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/7118417/is-it-time-for-quarantine-centres-to-go-regional/>

Professor Esterman has added, commenting on the latest quarantine breach in Melbourne which resulted in a five-day, state-wide lockdown, 'Typically, the people working in city quarantine hotels are poorly paid, travel home on public transport, and spread it to their families. That's what happened in Melbourne.

But if we move quarantine facilities out of cities to isolated places, any leaks would be much less likely to cause major transmission events.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/it-s-a-no-brainer-experts-call-for-quarantine-sites-to-be-moved-out-of-cities-20210213-p5726b.html>

A similar argument has been put by Associate Professor Philip Russo from the Australasian College for Infection Prevention and Control and president and deputy chair of the federal government's Infection Control Expert Group who has stated that moving infected people away from population centres 'just makes logical sense'.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/just-makes-logical-sense-top-adviser-joins-calls-to-move-covid-quarantine-out-of-big-cities-20201122-p56gun.html> The professor has added, 'Certainly, the further distance you have between people who are infected and the vulnerable community, that would be a good thing.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/just-makes-logical-sense-top-adviser-joins-calls-to-move-covid-quarantine-out-of-big-cities-20201122-p56gun.html>

Epidemiologist Mary-Louise McLaws, a University of New South Wales professor and World Health Organization advisor has also argued, 'You don't put COVID patients in the centre of town and expect them to be looked after by people who haven't got really top-level training, only for them at the end of the day to go home, back into a highly densely populated city. And we are doing it in every major city. You have to expect that occasionally someone will acquire [it].' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-22/coronavirus-hotel-quarantine-does-the-system-need-improving/12901574>

Moving quarantine facilities away from the middle of major population centres has also been supported by many non-experts as a valuable way to reduce Australia's chances of widespread infection. In an opinion piece published in Red Flag on February 2, 2021, Ben Hillier has stated, 'Australia has eradicated community transmission of the virus several times. And the blindingly obvious reality (you need not be an epidemiologist or any other type of medical expert to understand this) is that the only path to a new outbreak comes through the quarantine system. Why, then, are those facilities located in the most densely populated parts of the country—right in the middle of our capital cities?' <https://redflag.org.au/node/7529>

Ben Hillier has further explained the need for remote facilities, drawing on a New South Wales expert to support his view. Hillier has argued, "I don't think any system can ever guarantee that we won't have transmission events", New South Wales chief medical officer Kerry Chant said in December. If she is right—that, even in the best circumstances, with the best possible system, we should still expect the virus to "leak" from quarantine—then how can there be any justification for not building dedicated facilities away from major population centres? Places where, if there is a transmission event, it is already, in effect, contained?...

Isn't it a no-brainer to replace city-based hotel quarantine with dedicated quarantine facilities that put the public another step out of harm's way?

<https://redflag.org.au/node/7529>

2. Locating quarantine facilities away from major cities allows for centres to be purpose built

Those who support locating quarantine centres in remote locations argue that this would create an opportunity for these facilities to be purpose built.

Many experts have argued that Australia needs quarantine facilities that meet the strenuous standards needed to ensure that those kept within them are safe and comfortable and that infection does not spread into the community. Professor Mike Toole, an epidemiologist at the Burnet Institute, has urged authorities to engage with occupational hygienists and ventilation engineers to better understand how air moved in hotels. He has stressed the danger of inadequately equipped hotels, stating, 'We should be treating all those cold hotels like they are hot hotels because guests can convert from negative to positive during that period and therefore become infectious.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/it-s-a-no-brainer-experts-call-for-quarantine-sites-to-be-moved-out-of-cities-20210213-p5726b.html>

Others have stated that such improvement measures are not sufficient as hotels are simply not adequate as quarantine centres. Professor Mary-Louise McLaws, a leading epidemiologist and COVID-19 adviser to the World Health Organisation, has called for a purpose-built facility since June of 2020. Professor McLaws has stated, 'But no one was ready to listen. Sadly, it takes four hotel outbreaks to start a conversation.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/just-makes-logical-sense-top-adviser-joins-calls-to-move-covid-quarantine-out-of-big-cities-20201122-p56gun.html> A similar demand that quarantine centres be fit for purpose has come from Benjamin Veness, a doctor and co-founder of the advocacy group Health Care Workers Australia. Dr Veness has stated that what was needed were 'newer [facilities], ones with balconies, ones with windows that open, ones with air-conditioning systems you can upgrade so they're providing appropriate ventilation and not spreading COVID-19 potentially between rooms or into hallways.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/it-s-a-no-brainer-experts-call-for-quarantine-sites-to-be-moved-out-of-cities-20210213-p5726b.html>

In January 2021, Human Rights Commissioner, Scott McDougall, told a Queensland parliamentary hearing on quarantine facilities that the body had received 54 complaints about hotel quarantine, with the lack of daily access to fresh air a key concern.

Mr McDougall noted the Queensland Government had deemed it unsafe to allow travellers access to daily fresh air breaks but 'despite the efforts of the State Disaster Coordination Centre to source appropriate accommodation... many of these hotels do not have windows that open or have private balconies.' Mr McDougall concluded, 'Remote facilities would have the space and access to fresh air to ensure more humane conditions.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-22/coronavirus-qld-hotel-quarantine-mining-camps-national-cabinet/13080260>

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews has indicated that his government was 'actively pursuing' the construction of a purpose-built quarantine facility to mitigate the risk of taking return travellers. Mr Andrews has stated, 'It has a lesser risk than shared facilities in the centre of Melbourne, where even if people are separated, they're still sharing the same space...

We think by building this purpose-built facility, we can get the risk level down further.' <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/coronavirus/2021/02/17/victoria-quarantine-hotel-avalon/>

The premier further explained, 'People would be in the same location but would not be sharing the same spaces, so they're not under the same roofline. It would be a cabin-style, village-style environment, where there would be fresh air, where there would be not zero risk but lower risk.'

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/state/vic/2021/02/16/purpose-built-quarantine-vic/>

The plan proposed for Victoria's dedicated quarantine facilities includes surfaces that are easily cleaned, enabling the highest standard of infection control protocols; high quality separate ventilation systems per room, including windows; one-storey structures that allow for social distancing and separate staff facilities; individual rooms that cater to a variety of family sizes, with self-contained bathroom facilities; and on-site staff accommodation provided to limit movement of quarantine workers.

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/coronavirus/2021/02/17/victoria-quarantine-hotel-avalon/>

Victoria's proposed new facilities have meet with the approval of several infection-control experts. Adrian Esterman, Professor of Biostatistics and Epidemiology at the University of South Australia, has stated 'When you have the accommodation blocks, the ventilation is taken care of because they have windows that open and people can go out on their balcony to have fresh air. Having a breeze going through the place will disperse virus particles. They can even build filter equipment in there and air purifiers if they wanted.' <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/coronavirus/2021/02/17/victoria-quarantine-hotel-avalon/>

Professor Esterman has also noted that the proposal to build staff accommodation onsite for quarantine workers would also stop them 'getting infected then carting it back to their families and into the community'.

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/coronavirus/2021/02/17/victoria-quarantine-hotel-avalon/>

Avalon Airport and Melbourne Airport (Tullamarine) are the two locations being considered.

3. It is possible to transport overseas arrivals to regional quarantine facilities safely

There have been two major suggestions put forward as to ways in which overseas arrivals could be safely transported to quarantine facilities outside city centres. One is that the facilities be located within reasonable travelling distance of the airport from which passengers disembark. The other is that charter flights go directly to the quarantine facility.

The Victorian plan to have a purpose-built quarantine facility away from major city centres has two tentative locations – one near Tullamarine Airport, the other near Avalon Airport. Either of these proposals means that passengers could be easily taken to the quarantine centre. Avalon Airport's chief executive officer, Justin Giddings, has stated that preliminary plans to convert the international airport into a self-contained quarantine facility have been informally presented to the state government. Under the plans put forward by Mr Giddings, the airport would become a 'one stop shop' facility, with international passengers flown in and processed on the aircraft before being taken to their self-contained cabins. Quarantine staff and health professionals could live on site in cabins situated across the facility's spare land.

<https://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/news/geelong/avalon-airport-could-house-outdoor-coronavirus-quarantine-facility/news-story/ec1be2b4b67f9e42ff3499d8c472d008>

Mr Giddings has further stated that although within reach of major hospitals and other medical facilities, the airport is sufficiently remote to guard against the easy spread of infection. He has stated, 'At Avalon Airport the international terminal is very isolated, there is lots of space available to set up a camp and really provide people with the opportunity to be outside.'

<https://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/news/geelong/avalon-airport-could-house-outdoor-coronavirus-quarantine-facility/news-story/ec1be2b4b67f9e42ff3499d8c472d008>

The Queensland Government is also considering setting up a 1000-bed quarantine facility at Wagner Corporation Airport, on the outskirts of Toowoomba, east of Brisbane.

<https://www.9news.com.au/national/avalon-airport-could-be-transformed-into-victoria-hotel-quarantine-facility/7e6770ca-a0f0-4ad3-b431-1f1db2a3d082>

Queensland businessman John Wagner has indicated that he strongly supports a quarantine facility next to Toowoomba's Wellcamp Airport, which would charge the same fees as existing city-based hotels and potentially take up to 1000 returnees.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/billionaires-lindsay-fox-and-john-wagner-offer-to-run-quarantine-camps/news-story/2aea6298462d650442d6d2f748ef67d7>

Mr Wagner has further explained, 'We will build it and maintain it, do the food and beverage, Queensland will be involved in how the health side of things works and every room will have its own air conditioner system. There'll be no corridors for airborne particles to be transmitted.' <https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/queensland/qld-billionaire-john-wagners-plan-to-home-1000-international-returnees/news-story/9cc0ab911bce1c0d5f776b77df9e2ad7>

The other proposal as to how passengers could be safely transported to a quarantine facility is that in certain circumstances more remote regional centres could be used and those to go into quarantine would be flown directly there via chartered flights. This proposal has been made as a means of supplying agricultural regions with the seasonal workers they need. As a small-scale example of this measure in progress, on January 6, 2021, 157 Vanuatuans flew into Hobart Airport and immediately went into isolation in a government-run quarantine facility, where they will remain for 14 days before commencing work. This was achieved through the Commonwealth government's

Seasonal Worker Program. <https://www.stockandland.com.au/story/7078543/more-than-150-seasonal-workers-arrive-in-tasmania-from-vanuatu/> On January 20, 2021, the New South Wales Agriculture Minister, Adam Marshall, put forward a larger scheme that could service the mainland, suggesting that Pacific Island agricultural workers be flown into Australia on direct charter flights and serve their 14-day quarantine at a regional quarantine hub. <https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/7090480/national-quarantine-hub-calls-for-pacific-harvest-workers/>

Aviation experts said several regional New South Wales airports including Newcastle, Tamworth, Port Macquarie, and Illawarra could accept Boeing 737 and Airbus A320 passenger jets if they were used on direct charter flights from Pacific islands.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2021-01-14/regional-quarantine-centre-proposal-for-ag-workers/13057946>

The mining industry is making similar, though less rigorous, arrangements. For example, in Western Australia, flights carrying mine workers from outside the state must be chartered, to avoid contact with the public. Mine workers flying into Western Australia must be greeted by their employer as they disembark and need to display photo identification on arrival. Mine sites have access to COVID-19 testing kits, and sick workers are flown offsite. Mine sites have quarantine and isolation areas if someone displays symptoms or becomes sick. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-27/coronavirus-mining-and-resources-new-procedures/12062380>

4. Setting up quarantine centres away from major cities would solve some regional employment problems and secure workforces

Those who support regional quarantine facilities argue that such facilities would not just protect major cities from infection but could be used to address the employment needs of Australian farmers as they are already being used by the mining industry to secure its workforce.

On January 20, 2021, the New South Wales Agriculture Minister, Adam Marshall, put forward the idea that Pacific Island agricultural workers fly into Australia on direct charter flights and serve their 14-day quarantine at a regional quarantine hub. Mr Marshall stated, 'I am pleading with my federal counterparts - this is a national problem, and we need national leadership.

If there was a national facility, New South Wales would be financially willing to contribute to that, or on a pro-rata basis as per the workforce required.'

<https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/7090480/national-quarantine-hub-calls-for-pacific-harvest-workers/>

AusVeg spokesman, Tyson Cattle, has also indicated that the horticulture industry supported anything that would address the problem. He has stressed that the need for agricultural workers, especially those to harvest crops, was becoming urgent. He has stated, 'We're running out of time.'

<https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/7090480/national-quarantine-hub-calls-for-pacific-harvest-workers/>

On February 17, 2021, the Queensland Farmers Federation issued a media release which drew attention to the ongoing recruitment problems being faced by Queensland farmers because of COVID19. The media release states, 'COVID-19 has led to unprecedented labour market disruption with farmers struggling to retain and recruit critical workers during harvest, with national demand for casual labour expected to peak next month with up to 26,000 jobs likely to go unfilled.'

<https://www.qff.org.au/presidents-column/regional-quarantine-hubs-solution-farm->

[workforce/](#) The release highlights the major current shortfall that the farmers face, with far fewer Pacific Island workers having been able to come to Australia than are needed to complete the farm work to be done. The release notes, ‘The Approved Employers Association has identified the demand for workers from the Pacific in Queensland for the first half of 2021 at 4,500 workers (more than 25 plane loads) in comparison to the two planeloads of workers that arrived in the state this year.’

<https://www.qff.org.au/presidents-column/regional-quarantine-hubs-solution-farm-workforce/>

The release argues that individual farmers are not able to meet the quarantine needs of the number of workers they need to employ and that the best solution might be for the Queensland government to grant approval for a Regional Quarantine Hub to be established. The media release concludes, ‘Clearly, time is of the essence, therefore the sector is calling on the Queensland Government to grant priority approval for this facility to ensure Queensland has an agricultural workforce solution that is safe, well resourced, fit for purpose and responsive to the labour disruption the state is experiencing.’ <https://www.qff.org.au/presidents-column/regional-quarantine-hubs-solution-farm-workforce/>

In January 2021, the Queensland premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk stated that the Queensland government was considering workers camps in regional Queensland as centres at which to quarantine arrivals from overseas.

An existing 1400-room workers camp 20 minutes’ drive west of Gladstone and a yet-to-be-built, purpose-designed facility in Toowoomba are two sites flagged as alternatives to hotel quarantine in Queensland.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/annastacia-palaszczuk-renews-push-for-federal-aid-on-coronavirus-quarantine-facilities/news-story/2140ecbd46851c00f485e65d28eecd2>

The peak representative body for Queensland’s mining and gas companies, the Queensland Resources Council (QRC), has noted that it has already acted to ensure that its workforce is safe from COVID19. QRC’s chief executive, Ian Macfarlane, has indicated that QRC and its coal, metal and gas members had worked successfully to protect industry workers, their families and mining communities from COVID-19 over the past 11 months by supplying secure quarantine facilities at mining camps. <https://www.i-q.net.au/main/mining-industry-talks-over-work-camp-quarantine-plan>

QRC has indicated its readiness to liaise with the government regarding how its worker accommodation could be used to assist regional communities. Mr McFarlane has stated, ‘The resources industry will co-operate and assist where requested. Keeping our workers and the Queensland community safe, particularly in regional areas, will continue to be our priority. We will work closely with the government to provide input into any decisions that impact on our workforce and the communities in which we operate.’ <https://www.i-q.net.au/main/mining-industry-talks-over-work-camp-quarantine-plan>

5. It is possible to supply medical staff to service regional quarantine facilities using ADF personnel

It has been suggested that shortfalls in medical staff in regional quarantine facilities could be overcome through the deployment of military personnel.

Former World Health Organisation epidemiologist, Professor Adrian Esterman, has claimed that concerns about logistics and medical care at remote camps could be easily allayed if the federal government deployed the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Professor Esterman has stated, 'Let's face it, they can set up field hospitals that can cover just about any emergency. So, I think a lot of these questions about "Oh we have to have access to a trauma centre" can all be handled without any problems at all.'

<https://www.973fm.com.au/newsroom/experts-back-queenslands-call-for-quarantine-camps/>

A similar suggestion that ADF personnel be employed medically and in a range of other capacities in dealing with COVID19 has been made by Alexey Muraviev, Associate Professor of National Security and Strategic Studies, Curtin University.

Professor Muraviev has stated, 'Modern military power is designed to respond to a comprehensive suite of conventional, asymmetric or unconventional threats. The latter includes chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons, often referred to as CBRN... The Defence Science and Technology (DST) Group conducts specialised research and development to prevent and defend against CBRN attacks, including disease modelling. In simple terms, the ADF can offer specialist epidemiological detection and decontamination capabilities...

This is in addition to a wide range of other functions the ADF can offer, from trained medics to transport logistics to policing functions.' <https://theconversation.com/in-the-war-against-coronavirus-we-need-the-military-to-play-a-much-bigger-role-134149>

Some precedents have already been set for the use of military personnel for medical support in dealing with the consequences of COVID19 outbreaks. Since early March, Lieutenant General John Frewen has headed up a new COVID-19 taskforce which has been created by Defence to manage its response to the pandemic.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-28/australian-defence-force-ramps-up-coronavirus-covid-19-response/12098798> Later in March 2020, a military-wide edict warned defence force personnel that they could soon be deployed on coronavirus duties. The edict stated, 'ADF members are not to undertake private travel outside their local area, as defined by local Commanders, when not required for duty, including on weekends, until further notice.' Immediately after, the Army was mobilised in each state and territory to help police officers enforce strict quarantine measures on new arrivals into the country. As well as helping to enforce quarantine and self-isolation, Defence has established contact tracing teams to work with governments across the country to limit the number of new infections from identified patients. Also, in March 2020, ADF staff began contributing clinical and epidemiological support to the New South Wales Department of Health, while ADF engineering maintenance specialists have been called in to assist the Victoria-based Med-Con medical supplier with the production of protective masks, sanitisers and other medical items. <https://theconversation.com/in-the-war-against-coronavirus-we-need-the-military-to-play-a-much-bigger-role-134149>

The military has also supplied fully trained medical personnel to help manage COVID19. When, in April 2020, between 4,000 and 5,000 Tasmanians were forced into two weeks of quarantine as part of the shutdown of two hospitals on the island's north-west coast, medical support was supplied by the Australian Defence Forces (ADF). 1,200 local hospital staff and their households were required to go into mandatory 14-day quarantine. The Tasmanian Health Minister, Sarah Courtney, announced that ADF medics would help get the emergency department at the North West Regional Hospital up and running again once it had been thoroughly cleaned. The Minister stated, 'We are going to deploy these clean staff that have been provided from the ADF and from AusMAT (Australian Medical Assistance Teams) to Burnie to enable emergency department presentations within 72 hours.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-13/up-to-5000-tasmanians-in-isolation-over-north-west-coronavirus/12143936>

Similarly, in July 2020, army personnel were sent to Victoria to help paramedics amid fears the spread of coronavirus could stretch Ambulance Victoria too thin. The Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews said at the time that a key role of the additional ADF members would be to 'support the inevitable number of paramedics who will finish up having to quarantine, having to isolate, having to be furloughed because of exposure or potential exposure [to coronavirus]'. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-14/adf-sent-to-victoria-to-help-paramedics-coronavirus-response/12454274>

Arguments against locating quarantine centres away from major cities

1. Locating quarantine centres away from major cities would be unpopular with local residents

It has been noted that many regional areas are likely to reject being the location of a quarantine facility as they would see their communities' health being put at risk and local industries and employment threatened.

Two areas in Central Queensland have been proposed as possible quarantine facilities – one a disused miners' camp near Gladstone and the other a workforce accommodation village, Homeground Villages, at Calliope, which has 1,392 air-conditioned rooms with balconies and facilities including a swimming pool, tennis court, and a gym. Both have sparked letters of protest from the Gladstone's Mayor, Matt Burnett, who has written two separate letters of protest in response to each proposal, addressed to the Prime Minister and the Queensland premier. Details of the second letter were made public on February 1, 2021. Mr Burnett argued that the local the community's concerns included the risks of local transmission which could potentially shut down major industry, as well as the lack of medical facilities in the area. In media interviews he stated that 'As it currently stands there is no support for the proposal, so if they're going to go ahead with it, they've got a lot of work to do...I've probably only found one in 100, or two in 100 people that still have an open mind on the proposal.'

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-01/gladstone-mayor-says-community-opposes-covid-quarantine-facility/13110520>

Robbie Katter, member of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland for Traeger and leader of Katter's Australian Party has argued that many people move to regional areas to avoid the sort of risks that COVID19 represents and that they make significant sacrifices to live their preferred lifestyle. Mr Katter has stated, 'People will often live in a remote area because they're protected from things like this virus, and they'll put up with not having a doctor or vital public services.'

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/australia-may-quarantine-arrivals-in-isolated-rural-camps>

Regarding the proposal to establish a quarantine facility at Calliope, local resident, Ms Eveille-Coleman, has launched a petition opposing the idea. She has claimed a quarantine camp at Calliope would be too great of a risk for the community, stating, 'People are scared and concerned because we don't have the facilities if an outbreak happened... I understand why they see the property as a good spot to do it but realistically there is nothing out there to keep it self-contained.'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/lismore/community/resident-launches-petition-opposing-calliope-quarantine-camp/news-story/1d397cda6dbaf8e34d88ce382e0d2b6e>

In January 2021, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, after visiting areas in Central Queensland, which have been proposed by the Queensland government as a possible quarantine facility site, noted he had spoken with

locals who 'don't want to see Brisbane's issues dumped on those in the north; you hear that a bit about a few issues up here. They don't want to see that; they have issues around what it means for local health.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-21/pm-scott-morrison-tours-gladstone-central-queensland/13077606>

Mr Morrison has further argued that some regional areas have needs related to their national importance which would make them unsuitable as sites for quarantine facilities. Referring to Central Queensland, Mr Morrison stressed the importance of Gladstone's heavy industry. The Prime Minister stated, 'One of the reasons Australia has done well economically through the course of COVID is we've been able to keep our heavy industry going. The prospect of that being impacted in a community like [Gladstone] needs to be carefully considered.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-22/coronavirus-qld-hotel-quarantine-mining-camps-national-cabinet/13080260> Ken O'Dowd, the federal member for Flynn, the electoral district which includes the areas under discussion, has also indicated his opposition to a facility because of the potential damage from a shutdown affecting local big industry as well as the Gladstone region's inadequate healthcare services. Mr O'Dowd stated, 'I never thought I'd say "not in my patch", but there you go.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-01/gladstone-mayor-says-community-opposes-covid-quarantine-facility/13110520> The same point has been made by a number of those who live in Central Queensland. Andrew Pioch, who has lived and worked in Gladstone for 15 years, has also expressed his concerns about the region's industry. Mr Pioch has stated, 'If there is a case that gets leaked into the community, parts of the industry could get shut down, which is going to have a flow-on effect on the product that's exiting the port. I know that where I work, we're in small teams and COVID would actually shut the plant down if it was to get even one case into that plant.

It's not a case of being my backyard, it's more a case that industry here is the lifeblood of Gladstone and even more so of Queensland and Australia with the amount of product that goes out of the port.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-21/pm-scott-morrison-tours-gladstone-central-queensland/13077606>

2. Locating quarantine centres away from major cities would create significant transportation issues

Those who question the viability of establishing remote quarantine facilities argue that transporting returned Australian citizens to these centres may prove very difficult in terms of guaranteeing their health and ensuring that there was no spread of infection during transport.

The New South Wales Health Minister Brad Hazzard has pointed out the risk of keeping potentially infected travellers on long regional bus trips.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/nsw-would-see-distinct-disadvantages-in-moving-hotel-quarantine-to-rural-areas-minister-20210114-p56u74.html> Similarly, the chair in epidemiology at Deakin University, Catherine Bennett, has argued, 'Does the facility need to be in a remote area? No. It... adds risk associated with transporting arrivees long distances from international airports.'

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-15/howard-springs-quarantine-facilities-in-other-states-australia/13058438> The former head of the federal health department, Jane Halton, has detailed some of the range of transportation issues to weigh up around using regional mining camps or similar remote facilities as quarantine centres. Ms Halton has asked, 'Can we make sure that people stay safe? Can you transport them safely and effectively from their point of arrival?' Explaining further, Ms Halton has

stated, 'A lot of these camps aren't near the kind of airports where people would arrive into Australia. What risk does there accrue in moving people from an international airport to some kind of remoter region?'

<https://www.northweststar.com.au/story/7085333/states-reject-remote-quarantine-camps/>

These points have also been emphasised by South Australia's chief public health officer, Professor Nicola Spurrier. Referring to a number of proposals that her state establishes remote quarantine facilities, Professor Spurrier has stated, 'There are some [potential sites] that are smaller facilities that might take a smaller number [of arrivals], but you have to think about the transfer of people – and whenever there's a transfer of someone with COVID, you've always got a risk of transmission.' Referring to a proposal that a quarantine facility be set up at Tailem Bend, Professor Spurrier explained that the area's distance from Adelaide – around 100km from the airport and the Royal Adelaide Hospital and its dedicated COVID clinic – was the main element that precluded it from consideration. The professor stated, 'The logistics of it – if it were closer to Adelaide, I think we'd be able to take a more positive view of it.' The Professor then explained further, 'One of the issues we always need to be mindful of is how close we are to our COVID hospital – and our main hospital is the Royal Adelaide – and we need to be able to transfer positive cases... so if we used that facility as a general quarantine facility and we had positive cases, we'd need to work out how to transfer them – and when we do transfer people, there's always a risk of transfer to someone else.' The Professor noted that with several international arrivals each day, 'we'd need to transfer them by bus to a facility [and] all of that would mean a transmission risk for the driver'.

<https://indaily.com.au/news/2021/02/17/spurrier-rejects-remote-quarantine-for-sa-warning-of-transmission-risk/>

Professor Spurrier also sought to clear up some of the misconceptions she believes exist around already-established quarantine facilities that people generally regard as remote. Referring to the quarantine facility in the Northern Territory at Howard Springs, the Professor explained that though this centre was not surrounded by population, it was not remote from medical facilities, nor did it pose major transport problems for plane arrivals disembarking in the Northern Territory. Professor Spurrier stated, 'People think it's out the middle of nowhere... but it's only 20 km from Darwin – so it's close to the airport, it's close to the hospital.'

<https://indaily.com.au/news/2021/02/17/spurrier-rejects-remote-quarantine-for-sa-warning-of-transmission-risk/>

3. Locating quarantine centres away from major cities would not give access to the necessary specialist medical staff

Those opposed to establishing quarantine facilities in remote areas argue that will be very difficult to supply these facilities with the necessary medical staff both to treat those being quarantined and to support the local community should an outbreak occur. The Australian Medical Association of Queensland (AMAQ) has expressed caution regarding remote quarantine centres. AMAQ president, Professor Chris Perry, has stated, 'The expertise of local medical professionals must be at the centre of any potential program to ensure they can manage, contain and treat any COVID cases, and have all the support they need to deliver exemplary healthcare to regional communities and those in quarantine.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-14/qld-coronavirus-international-arrivals-quarantine-mining-camps/13057898> Similarly, the chair in epidemiology at Deakin University, Catherine Bennett, has argued, 'Does the facility

need to be in a remote area? No. It makes it too hard to have skilled staff, health expertise and access to acute hospitals...' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-15/howard-springs-quarantine-facilities-in-other-states-australia/13058438>

The Queensland Opposition rural and regional affairs spokesman, Dale Last, also opposes regional quarantine centres set up at mining camps, noting that most regional areas do not have the medical staff and facilities to support such centres and to service local communities in the event of an outbreak. Mr Last has stated, 'a lot of these mining communities do not have the resources to cope with a COVID outbreak if that was to be inadvertently introduced by virtue of having these mining camps set up as a quarantine facility.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-14/qld-coronavirus-international-arrivals-quarantine-mining-camps/13057898>

The federal government has also expressed reservations regarding establishing quarantine centres in regional areas. It has stated, 'Returned Australians are being hosted in approved quarantine facilities around the country that meet, and are located close to, the necessary health and transport infrastructure.' The emphasis on proximity to the necessary health infrastructure is a main reason for the federal government's caution regarding remote quarantine facilities. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-14/qld-coronavirus-international-arrivals-quarantine-mining-camps/13057898>

The Australian Government's National Review of Hotel Quarantine outlines some of the medical obligations that need to be met for returnees in quarantine. It states, 'During the 14-day quarantine period, travelers are tested for COVID-19 irrespective of whether they

are symptomatic, at approximately days two and 11 of quarantine. This is consistent with the AHPPC guidelines. In some jurisdictions a positive result will result in a change of accommodation in the Hotel Quarantine System, for others it will result in transfer to hospital...'

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/10/national-review-of-hotel-quarantine.pdf>

Critics of regional quarantine centres argue that remote facilities are unlikely to be able to offer the necessary hospital care close to the centre and may not be able to supply the staff needed to regularly test those being kept in quarantine. Linda Scott, president of the Australian Local Government Association and City of Sydney councilor, has stated, 'Many New South Wales regional centres have emergency and health services under significant pressure, and remote communities have large numbers of vulnerable communities. Bringing hotel quarantine to regional areas could push strained local health services to breaking point.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/over-my-dead-body-regional-mayors-at-odds-over-quarantine-facilities-20210220-p574as.html>

Dubbo mayor, Ben Shields, has similarly rejected the proposal, stating of his town, 'Our medical facilities compared to the city are absolutely atrocious.' Cr Mack, the Albury mayor, has said of his town, 'We've got a great airport. But our health facilities are in the dark ages.' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/over-my-dead-body-regional-mayors-at-odds-over-quarantine-facilities-20210220-p574as.html>

It has further been argued that not only would regional areas have difficulty providing adequate health care for those who may have contracted COVID19 either while in quarantine or through a leak from the facility into the community, they would also have difficulty tracing the links of potentially infected people should a leak occur.

Contact tracing is a highly skilled task and while regional communities are smaller, they would not have the already established bank of people trained to perform the tracing work.

Gerard Fitzgerald, Emeritus Professor, School of Public Health, Queensland University of Technology has noted, 'The key strategy to preventing further community transmission is to identify all cases through extensive testing, isolate people who test positive, and then trace their close contacts.

These contacts require initial testing to see if they are also potential spreaders, but more importantly they need to be isolated and closely monitored. Should they develop symptoms, they also need to be tested.

The process of identification of cases, ensuring isolation and monitoring, identifying contacts and following up each of those requires extensive effort.'

<https://theconversation.com/victorias-coronavirus-contact-tracers-are-already-under-the-pump-what-happens-next-141792>

4. Locating quarantine centres away from major cities would be very expensive and not sufficient to meet Australia's quarantine needs

Opponents of setting up remote quarantine centres to largely replace hotel quarantine have argued that the financial costs of such a scheme would be extremely substantial and that what could be built would not be sufficient to meet the demands on the system. The National Review of Hotel Quarantine was released in October 2020. In its executive summary it stated, 'From 28 March 2020 all returning travelers have been required to undertake 14 days of quarantine in a designated facility. Since then, some 130,000 international and domestic travelers have been quarantined [largely in hotels] slowing the spread of COVID-19 in Australia.'

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/10/national-review-of-hotel-quarantine.pdf>

Even those who support remote facilities acknowledge that to establish quarantine centres in regional areas on the scale that would be required to meet Australia's needs would be a costly process. Adrian Esterman, Professor of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, University of South Australia, is one of those who, while favouring remote quarantine centres, also recognises the expense involved. He has stated, 'One issue that arises from using rural quarantine is cost. It will be expensive to build and run these isolated facilities, and to fly workers in and out. It will also be expensive to fly returned travellers into these remote settings, presumably at the expense of the government.'

<https://theconversation.com/another-hotel-worker-tests-positive-in-melbourne-its-time-to-move-hotel-quarantine-out-of-cities-154820>

Burnet Institute epidemiologist, Professor Mike Toole, though also a proponent of remote facilities, has warned this would be a time-consuming and expensive exercise. The professor has stated, 'We're not China, we can't build these things in three days, it takes months.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/it-s-a-no-brainer-experts-call-for-quarantine-sites-to-be-moved-out-of-cities-20210213-p5726b.html>

Critics note that not only would such a scheme be very costly and take time to establish, but it would also not be adequate to meet the demands of the number of returnees that Australia must keep in quarantine. Melbourne University epidemiologist Professor Tony Blakely, though another supporter of remote quarantine facilities, has acknowledged "I would assume that we won't be able to mobilise enough Howard Springs-like facilities to accommodate everyone who wants to come back (to Australia).'

<https://www.news.com.au/national/calls-for-changes-to-australias-hotel-quarantine-arrangements-as-mutant-coronavirus-strains-spread/news-story/33e8760b67f2fe9e7463c6059780a25e>

Trade Minister Simon Birmingham, who opposes any substantial reliance on regional facilities, has stated, 'You have to realise that there are capacity limits both in terms of what can be done in the cities, but if you

want to look outside of the cities there are potentially even greater capacity limits in terms of the numbers of people who could be processed...'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/just-makes-logical-sense-top-adviser-joins-calls-to-move-covid-quarantine-out-of-big-cities-20201122-p56gun.html> The same point has been made by the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, who has stated, 'It remains the case that the most effective way to deliver at the scale that Australia needs to deliver these arrangements... hotel quarantine remains the most effective way to do that.

And that remains the advice I have from my experts. And the alternative is not that clear to me.' [https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politicsnow-victoria-restrictions-return-after-hotel-worker-infected/news-](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politicsnow-victoria-restrictions-return-after-hotel-worker-infected/news-story/a06d1aefa9e25c23adc0d321dffa67ad#U703562184722HSG)

[story/a06d1aefa9e25c23adc0d321dffa67ad#U703562184722HSG](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politicsnow-victoria-restrictions-return-after-hotel-worker-infected/news-story/a06d1aefa9e25c23adc0d321dffa67ad#U703562184722HSG)

In February 2021, the Prime Minister further stated, 'This idea that you can replace the hotel quarantine system, bring Australians back home, manage your health agenda effectively through some other mechanism, I think we have to keep a sense of realism about this and a sense of proportion. 211,500 people [the then current figure] have come back, we've had a handful of cases that haven't been completely contained within that.'

<https://www.news.com.au/national/calls-for-changes-to-australias-hotel-quarantine-arrangements-as-mutant-coronavirus-strains-spread/news-story/33e8760b67f2fe9e7463c6059780a25e>

5. Remote quarantine facilities would not be necessary if hotel quarantine were managed more effectively.

Opponents of establishing more remote quarantine centres argue that if the hotel quarantine facilities were uniformly run along the best practice models that have already been recommended then there would be no need for other arrangements. They stress in particular that adequate ventilation and rigorous staff training need to be in place.

Commentators on the operation of Australia's quarantine system have noted that the risk of spreading infection could be greatly reduced with improved protocols and practices, thus removing the need for alternate facilities. Raina MacIntyre, the head of the Kirby Institute's biosecurity program, has suggested that Australia's hotel quarantine system will continue to face potential leaks of highly contagious COVID-19 strains until authorities recognise the threat posed by airborne transmission of the virus. Professor McIntyre has stated, 'Perhaps hotels built more recently should be the only ones chosen for hotel quarantine, as they comply with current ventilation standards. Older buildings may not...We need formal guidelines and protocols on ventilation inside these hotels.' <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/is-it-time-for-a-national-approach-to-hotel-quaran>

Professor McIntyre has suggested that remote quarantine facilities may not be necessary if those quarantine hotels currently in use were properly managed. Professor McIntyre has stated, 'If they just gave all the workers a N95 respirator and addressed ventilation, that would probably dramatically reduce the risk of these infections continuing to occur. The problem is airborne transmission hasn't been acknowledged. It's not in the federal guidelines, that's why it hasn't been addressed. Unless you acknowledge it's happening, you can't actually fix it. We don't even check the ventilation of hotels that we use for quarantine.' Dr McIntyre has further stated that hotel quarantine could be done safely if ventilation was an essential component of the selection criteria. <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/nz-travel-bubble-snaps-shut-20210215-p572h6>

Burnet Institute epidemiologist, Professor Mike Toole, has similarly argued that what is required is that Australia develop and rigorously implement a set of infection control standards that ensure our hotel quarantine facilities are safe. Professor Toole has stated, 'We need national standards for hotel quarantine. It's beyond time. We should be thinking as a nation, not as this little cluster of states and territories.

We need to fix ventilation, to make sure there's no air duct blowing air down a corridor past all the guest rooms. Victoria sent in engineers to redo the whole hotel ventilation systems where positive people are staying.

The threat of new variants makes it even more important to get on top of any leaks.'

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/news/gp/clinical/latest-hotel-quarantine-leak-proves-we-re-not-lear>

Professor Toole has further noted that the recent hotel quarantine breaches in Western Australia, New South Wales and Queensland suggest a lack of preparedness and a reluctance to learn from other states. The Professor has stated, 'It really stuns me that in June last year, we had that whole hoo-hah aimed at Dan Andrews over hiring private security guards. We had a long judicial review. And another federal report. And here we are – with New South Wales and Western Australia, at least, still employing private security guards.

Sydney [residents] didn't even have to wear masks until January 17th. [Meanwhile], the National Cabinet decision to test quarantine staff [daily] was on January 8th, but it took Western Australia until the 25th to implement it, and Western Australia must have one of the lowest testing burdens in the country.'

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/news/gp/clinical/latest-hotel-quarantine-leak-proves-we-re-not-lear>

The chair in epidemiology at Deakin University, Catherine Bennett, has argued that the people moving between quarantine facilities and the community are the risk, not their physical proximity to the rest of the population. Professor Bennett has stated, 'Managing this is the key, [as is] monitoring for infections with regular — each shift — staff testing, and weekly PCR [testing].'

From her point of view what is crucial is good practice, not location. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-15/howard-springs-quarantine-facilities-in-other-states-australia/13058438> University of Sydney infectious diseases expert Robert Booy has similarly stated that a new location would not solve the problems that have plagued hotel quarantine. He has stated, 'It's often human error that's the problem, not the facility, so we need to get better at managing quarantine within the settings... Whether you've got a new facility or an old one, you need to get the best quality out of your people. We will still have the same old problem of people who need excellent training and surveillance.'

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/melbourne-airport-warns-of-significant-work-for-quarantine-facility-20210216-p5731a.html>

Further implications

The issue of how best to accommodate those who have returned to Australia for their two weeks of mandatory period of quarantine remains a difficult one. The pressure from Australians wishing to return to Australia continues to grow. As of February 2, 2021, there were nearly 40,000 Australians overseas who wanted to come home.

<https://theconversation.com/should-aussies-stranded-overseas-go-to-the-united-nations-for-help-to-get-home-154372> Further, the economic impact of closed borders, especially the loss of overseas tourists and foreign students, continues to exacerbate the damage COVID19 has inflicted on the Australian economy, notably in terms of increased

unemployment. Now that Australia is beginning to hope that it may be able to halt the spread of COVID19 within the Australian community, there is less tolerance in some quarters of our largely impermeable borders. Any liberalisation of border restrictions will, however, depend on Australia's ability to minimise the infection risk posed by those allowed into the country. It is in this context that the effectiveness of the country's quarantine facilities has attracted so much attention.

Most returning travellers have been quarantined at facilities in Australia's two largest cities, with the nation's largest airports, Sydney, and Melbourne. All major cities keeping returnees in quarantine have experienced some level of breach, with the most severe instances having occurred in Melbourne which in 2020 resulted in the state experiencing a second wave of infections and a four-month lockdown of the capital. In early 2021, another quarantine hotel breach saw a five-day snap lockdown of the whole state. Such events have had Victoria repeatedly put an embargo on overseas flights arriving in Melbourne. They have also left many states and city centres apprehensive about the safety of accepting large numbers of returning Australians. The Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, has suggested that the National Cabinet consider reducing the number of Australians able to return home, only allowing in those who have 'compassionate grounds' for wanting to return.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/12/daniel-andrews-flags-shutting-out-stranded-australians-except-for-compassionate-cases> This proposal has been condemned by many as denying expatriate Australians their legal right to return to their country of origin. While continuing to lock out returning Australians and overseas visitors also poses significant economic problems for Australia.

Australia's tourism industry and tertiary education sector rely heavily on visitors from overseas and on foreign students. In 2019, approximately 9.4 million tourists visited Australia from overseas. There was a total of 4.4 million international visitors to New South Wales in the 2019 calendar year and 3.1 million international visitors to Victoria. In 2019, tourism in Australia accounted for 3.1 percent of the national GDP, contributing \$60.8 billion to the Australian economy. Of this, 26 percent came from international visitors to Australia. [https://www.budgetdirect.com.au/travel-insurance/research/tourism-](https://www.budgetdirect.com.au/travel-insurance/research/tourism-statistics.html#:~:text=How%20many%20tourists%20visit%20Australia,tourists%20visited%20Australia%20from%20overseas)

[statistics.html#:~:text=How%20many%20tourists%20visit%20Australia,tourists%20visited%20Australia%20from%20overseas](https://www.budgetdirect.com.au/travel-insurance/research/tourism-statistics.html#:~:text=How%20many%20tourists%20visit%20Australia,tourists%20visited%20Australia%20from%20overseas). While these figures are significant, the federal government has argued that a growth in local tourism could help address the shortfall. <https://www.tra.gov.au/covid-19-recovery>

For the tertiary education sector, especially in Victoria where tertiary education is a major contributor to the state's economy, the answer is not so simple. A report cited by Victoria University on November 10, 2020, argued that new modelling demonstrated that if Australia's borders remained closed there would only be about 300,000 international students living in Australia by June of 2021, a drop of around 50 percent.

<https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/tertiary-education/australia-to-lose-half-its-international-students-by-mid-2021> The report further noted that the problem was not confined to the university sector which was having to lay off staff and reduce courses. It also affects other sectors. About 57 percent, or \$21.4 billion of the \$37.5 billion in annual revenue associated with international education comes from the other goods and services purchased in the wider economy by overseas students.

<https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/tertiary-education/australia-to-lose-half-its-international-students-by-mid-2021> International students contribute \$13.7 billion to the Victorian economy in a normal year.

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/melbourne-airport-warns-of-significant-work-for-quarantine-facility-20210216-p5731a.html> The manager of Avalon Airport, Justin Giddings, has clearly indicated the airport's enthusiasm to have a quarantine facility built on its land and has indicated that it could help secure the return of international students to Victoria. Mr Giddings has stated, 'It could easily be bigger than Howard Springs and I certainly would be very comfortable with having the likes of international students here, if that's what the government wanted.'

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/melbourne-airport-warns-of-significant-work-for-quarantine-facility-20210216-p5731a.html>

Critics have argued that although Australian states must protect their citizens from the risk of infection by controlling their borders, ways must also be found to allow at least more targeted entry of some visitors or returnees. The solution is likely to be multipronged – relying on better hotel quarantine procedures (including improved choice of hotels with suitable ventilation and improved training of staff), the use of a larger number of regional quarantine facilities, and the rapid uptake of COVID19 vaccinations within the Australian community and by those seeking to enter this country.