

OCN POSITION STATEMENT ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC ISSUES
The Gaps in Hotel Quarantine
February 2021

Introduction

To date, the NSW Government has not acknowledged the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to residents in apartment buildings. The issues related to apartment buildings have gone under the radar as health authorities have had to focus on higher risk locations such as nursing homes, and on border control and the national Hotel Quarantine Program (HQP). The HQP has been Australia's primary defense against the COVID-19 pandemic and has prevented the widespread and uncontrolled community transmission seen in other countries.

Background

In reality, apartment living is one of close proximity, difficulty in physical distancing, and multiple shared areas and common services. These factors are intensified in high density high-rise buildings. It is a complex social and physical environment.

There are over eighty thousand strata schemes housing approximately two million people in NSW. The population is diverse and includes many lower income people, older people and people with co-morbidities. The age of buildings and the standards of maintenance, cleanliness, and ventilation and sewerage systems vary. Residents have little control and no choice but to use common facilities. In high-rise buildings across large cities, services often also include concierge, gyms, pools and saunas. And, in mixed use buildings, businesses such as cafes, hairdressers and professional services increase foot traffic.

Government Approach to Strata

Unlike Victoria, the NSW Public Health Orders have never included strata property and there has been no targeted guidance to the sector.¹ The Department of Health (DOH) has no protocol for communicating health information or alerts to Owners Corporations, even in situations where their building is the site of COVID-19 exposure.

Quarantine Staff Working in Strata Schemes

It is now evident that casual security guard(s) working in COVID-19 quarantine hotels are also working in high-rise apartment buildings in Sydney.² It is common for high-rise apartment buildings to employ a security guard. Importantly, the role of a guard in an apartment building is not static. It involves working as concierge; frequent direct contact with residents and visitors, and patrolling indoor areas, floors and common facilities. The workforce is casualised, low paid, working across multiple sites and for different employers.

Hotel Quarantine Program

The Hotel Quarantine Program (HQP) is a high-risk environment. It concentrates overseas returnees in designated hotels in major cities and is the first line of defense against the COVID-19 pandemic. In NSW, the program relies on a casual workforce.

¹ In early 2020 under a pressure from the sector, NSW Fair Trading established a project to take account of strata related issues for COVID-19 emergency measures. This has not been maintained. Efforts to get DOH to provide some tailored advice or notify owners corporations has been unsuccessful.

² In one example, it involves a high-rise 35 floor mixed use mixed building with 140 units in the CBD. It may also be occurring in other centres like Pyrmont, Olympic Park and Chatswood. There is no data on the size of the 'cross-over' workforce. OCN is informed that 7 percent of the security industry works in the HQP.

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NSW, Victoria, Queensland, SA and WA have all suffered the results of virus leaks from their quarantine hotels via infected security guards (inadvertently). The economic and social cost has been severe with lockdown, mass testing, illness and deaths. The more contagious UK, South African and Brazilian variants pose an additional threat to workers and the community.

In NSW, HQP staff are tested once during their shift but only notified if the result is positive and permitted to work elsewhere without restriction. Government is unaware what that other employment may be. In fact, staff have become infectious and tested positive only after being in the community. The vaccination program cannot be relied on because there is no evidence yet that vaccines will prevent infection.

Lack of communication

There has been long-standing frustration that DOH does not communicate with strata owners and residents, even when their building is the site of COVID-19 exposure. This has caused distress for residents who see police or medical staff in full PPE entering their building. It also undermines Building Managers and Strata Committees responsible for cleaning and maintenance of building services and the common property environment. The gap in communication has been a source of complaint in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.³

The Risk of Transmission in Apartment Buildings

The COVID-19 virus is airborne and there is growing evidence that COVID-19 can be transmitted over longer distances and remain on surfaces for longer periods than first thought. It can also be transmitted through fecal matter. These factors alone should highlight the risk of employing quarantine staff in high-density apartment buildings.

Further, investigations into SARS outbreaks across multiple units in high rise apartment buildings have also traced transmission of the virus to faulty air ducts⁴ and defective sewerage systems spreading the virus into apartments across multiple floors.⁵ In one study, the infection was traced to airflow drawing the virus out of an apartment and into the hallway, resulting in infection of a neighbor.⁶ Similarly, the escape of aerosolized virus infected neighboring guests and staff in a quarantine hotel.⁷

In NSW, while most strata residents can rely on natural ventilation and their HVAC system this also depends on correct installation and maintenance. In older buildings it is more likely that ventilation and plumbing systems do not meet current standards.⁸ The pandemic also comes on top of decades of systemic defects that have caused a collapse in public confidence in building quality.

The social and physical environment of an apartment building is complex.⁹ It is not possible to comprehensively assert that the risk of transmission is always negligible or no greater than the risk to the wider community. It is even less possible to make this assertion when a cross-over work force is involved.

³ [COVID-19: Neighbours of a Perth security not told of positive diagnosis | 7NEWS \(ascoronavirus.com\)](#)

⁴ [Possible aerosol transmission of COVID-19 associated with an outbreak in an apartment in Seoul, South Korea, 2020 - International Journal of Infectious Diseases \(ijidonline.com\)](#)

⁵ [Probable Evidence of Fecal Aerosol Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in a High-Rise Building | Annals of Internal Medicine \(acpjournals.org\)](#)

⁶ [Aerosol transmission of SARS-CoV-2? Evidence, prevention and control - ScienceDirect](#)

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-11/how-a-nebuliser-produces-droplets-covid-19-can-hitch-a-ride-on/13140554>

⁸ [AMCA advice on COVID-19 and HVAC - HVAC&R News](#)

⁹ [AMCA advice on COVID-19 and HVAC - HVAC&R News](#)

NSW compared to Victoria

In 2020, Melbourne's second wave of COVID-19 resulted in hundreds of cases of infection, illness and deaths. The Coates COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Inquiry¹⁰ was critical of the Government's reliance on a casual workforce. The private security industry has low entry requirements, involves layers of sub-contractors working across multiple sites and in second employment in different roles.

In Victoria, the Government adopted the recommendation that such workers cannot be employed in second jobs. In 2021, the WA Government announced that it would follow suit after another case of an infected guard.

The 2020 second wave in Melbourne included dozens of cases in nine public housing apartment towers. The Chief Health Officer described the situation as 'potentially explosive'. The towers house many low-income workers, and the media reported that one resident was a DOH sub-contractor who patrolled several floors of another apartment building - that building was also closed for deep cleaning across those patrolled areas.¹¹ This demonstrates a level of attention and caution in Victoria that is not been shown in NSW.

OCN RECOMMENDATION

1. NSW should fund a dedicated, well remunerated quarantine workforce and, like Victoria and WA, not permit quarantine workers to be employed in second jobs.
2. DOH should develop a protocol and communicate with the Owners Corporation/building management when a strata building is the site of COVID-19 exposure. That communication should include cautionary alerts to residents that promote testing and other protective measures.
3. Public Health Orders should explicitly refer to strata property, including shared facilities such as function rooms and gymnasiums commonly found in apartment complexes.

¹⁰ [COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Inquiry](#)

¹¹ [Why Melbourne's public housing towers have 'explosive potential' for coronavirus to spread - ABC News](#)