

Alert as wave set to peak in weeks

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SOUTH Australia's Covid-19 cases are expected to spike within six weeks as the state grapples with a new Omicron variant and an influenza patient surge.

Health Minister Chris Picton (pictured) said non-urgent elective surgery had been cut and 28 private hospital beds opened for public patients from next week.

In the past week, almost 30 non-emergency operations have been delayed as the elective surgery cuts were imposed on Adelaide hospitals.

This would also ease extreme system pressure as latest SA Health data shows almost

1200 new flu cases have been detected in the past week, bringing the total patient count to nearly 4900.

Almost 480 flu patients have been treated in hospital this year but no deaths have yet been recorded.

The beds have been opened in expectation of a Covid-19 influx with cases expected to peak at 6000 a day in mid-July, according to the latest SA Health modelling.

SA Health believes cases will likely hit between 4000 and 5000 cases based on the Adelaide University modelling, which is more than double current levels.

Hospital rates are expected to increase a short time after, forecasts the modelling, which uses current NSW data.

The details emerged as authorities launched a campaign to urge people to only visit emergency departments in extreme cases and authorities ruled out easing allied health job mandates.

There are currently more than 100 public patients in private hospitals across the state.

"We have opened every single hospital bed across the system," Mr Picton said.

"The truth is, we have used every single hospital bed that is available."

Chief public health officer Professor Nicola Spurrier said those infected with earlier Omicron strains had a 73 per cent protection against other variants.

HOSPITAL CARE IN CRISIS

Alarming report details litany of safety issues

RECORD RAMPING



TREATMENT IN CHAIRS



PATIENTS TURNED AWAY



FAKING BED NUMBERS



Flinders Medical Centre. Picture: Roy VanDerVegt/AAP

Disarray could've caused disaster

BRAD CROUCH

AN investigation into Royal Adelaide Hospital's response to a hotel fire at North Adelaide in April found it failed to implement its catastrophe plan because no one checked a mobile phone.

The RAH's emergency department was supposed to be ready for an influx of patients under the disaster plan but no one looked at a mobile phone with a text message about the looming rush "until long after the catastrophe was over", checks by the SA Salaried Medical Officers Association (SASMOA) have found.

In a report, doctors involved said: "There is a level of disarray in the RAH administration ... the lack of an integrated disaster plan could have gone horribly wrong."

The report - sent to SafeWork SA - further states: "The RAH emergency department were completely unaware that the escalation process had occurred until after the disaster had been downgraded."

SA Health said there was "an appropriate response" to the fire and all patients were immediately treated.

Doctors told SASMOA the issue of ensuring the disaster plan was implemented as a priority when a catastrophic event happened had been on the RAH "risk register" for at least four years without resolution.

Since April, SASMOA has received SafeWork SA permission to have numerous site visits to the RAH emergency department after repeated complaints from staff about overcrowding, which have caused safety issues.

This follows a survey of public hospital doctors that



The Comfort Adelaide Meridian Hotel fire. Picture: 7NEWS

found 82 per cent felt the system was at crisis point or not coping, while 80 per cent said they were not coping or were at risk of not coping.

One visit found 90 people in the 69-capacity emergency department, including 45 who had been treated but were stuck there due to the unavailability of ward beds.

One person had been waiting 65 hours for a suitable mental-health bed. This, in turn, had added to ramping and left other patients stuck in the waiting room.

Doctors told the SASMOA investigator that adverse incidents included an elderly male patient who had been ramped and ended up with a perforated bowel, and a young woman who deteriorated so badly while ramped that she ended up in the intensive care unit.

Doctors are calling for a "transit lounge" for emergency department patients who have been treated and are waiting for a ward bed, to help improve patient flow.

In March 2020, Central Adelaide Local Health Network chief executive Lesley Dwyer predicted ambulance ramping at the RAH would end by April 30, 2020. It has since soared to record levels.

BRAD CROUCH

THE public hospital system is at breaking point, with patients being "treated on chairs" and doctors working 11-day shifts, an alarming review by the Salaried Medical Officers Association has found.

Documents obtained by The Advertiser show a litany of issues within the hospital system that have been referred to SafeWork SA. They include: **A FAILURE** by the Royal Adelaide Hospital to implement its catastrophe plan after a fire

at a North Adelaide hotel in late April because no one had checked a mobile phone for text messages;

SA Health allegedly faking the number of emergency department beds at Flinders Medical Centre to make it appear it had more than were available; and

THE FMC turning away an ectopic pregnancy emergency due to lack of space.

Doctors say ED patients at the FMC are being treated in chairs, as officials allegedly pressure staff to bring patients

in from ambulances to reduce the appearance of ambulance ramping - resulting in "internal ramping".

The state government has pledged 350 more paramedics and ambulance officers, 300 more nurses, 100 more doctors and 300 new beds to address ramping but concedes it will "take years" to fix.

However, SA Salaried Medical Officers Association (SASMOA) senior industrial officer Bernadette Mulholland said a royal commission was needed into ramping, saying

no one was willing to take responsibility for the crisis.

"There is little SafeWork SA can do without creating further disruption for the public," she said.

"They can't close the hospital doors because it is deemed unsafe. We have been having these arguments for years and are getting nowhere.

"It is getting worse and no one is accountable. We need a royal commission."

Ms Mulholland said fatigue was creating safety risks and warned that exhausted doc-

tors eventually would leave the South Australian system for jobs elsewhere. SafeWork SA sanctioned numerous recent SASMOA visits to the RAH and FMC, triggered by major issues at both sites.

The doctors quoted in the documents painted a grim picture of the situation.

"Today is the worst I have ever seen it. I seriously think someone could die today," a senior FMC doctor told an investigator during a visit on June 15.

On that occasion, after the

FMC declared a code yellow internal crisis due to overcrowding, the medic found 89 patients in an ED with 61 beds, including 36 who had been treated but were stuck waiting for a ward bed.

It found patients being treated in chairs as a last resort, with one doctor saying: "FMC ED is doing waiting room medicine now."

One doctor told investigators that he had worked 11 days straight and not taken leave in three years.

Staff are "immensely fa-

tigued and burnt out", the report to SafeWork SA states.

It quoted staff as saying they were being "hounded by the executive to get patients off the ramp".

Another said there was "constant bombardment" from management to clear the ramp, even if it meant putting patients in corridors, resulting in "internal ramping".

Staff were furious that the SA Health emergency dashboard continued to show FMC as having 71 ED cubicles, saying 12 beds had been removed

as a trial with no indication if or when they would be reinstated.

Pressure on EDs comes as almost 1200 new flu cases were diagnosed in the past week, with 476 people in hospital.

Health Minister Chris Picton on Tuesday launched a Winter Demand Strategy to manage demand. It includes opening extra beds and providing more community care so people can avoid going to hospital.

"The message for South Australians is please don't go to emergency departments if you don't need to," he said.

SA Health acknowledged hospitals were very busy at the moment and confirmed a trial was under way at FMC to improve patient flow.

"Once the initial trial has been evaluated and ongoing changes to the bed configuration are confirmed, the SA Health dashboard will be updated accordingly," a statement said. "The ED has flexible spaces that are used, as required, to assist with patient flow during periods of high demand, where patients are under clinical supervision."