



Gavin Pearce MP
Federal Member for Braddon
Shadow Assistant Minister for Aged Care

Media statement

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Labor must accept responsibility for surge in COVID deaths

I was first elected as the Federal Member for Braddon in May 2019. Nine months later, the COVID-19 global pandemic hit our shores. Since the outbreak, the pandemic was, and continues to be, the most defining influence on my political career and I am sure that's the case for most of my parliamentary colleagues.

From the outset Australians looked to its federal government for leadership. We needed to act quickly to this new and unknown threat and that's what we did, calling the pandemic two weeks before the World Health Organisation.

Officially, over 6.5 million lives have been lost worldwide due to the coronavirus pandemic, with other estimates stating that it's more likely to be over 16 million.

Domestically, Australians have done it tough. Between March 2020 and May 2022 there were 8,471 reported virus-related deaths and I want to acknowledge the thousands who have been personally impacted by the tragic loss of a loved one due to the pandemic. Yours is an unfathomable grief.

Collectively, however, we have a lot to be grateful for. After several years of battling the worst pandemic in 100-years, Australia emerged with one of the lowest rates of loss of life, the highest rates of vaccination and the strongest economic recoveries in the world.

The decision to make the National Incident Centre, at the Department of Health, the epicentre of our national approach to this new threat was crucial to that success. Day in, day out, we were guided by trusted medical professionals who offered calm, consistent and considered advice.

As we began to emerge from the pandemic in 2022, these same health professionals warned that the pandemic won't just go away. Their advice was that the virus would continue to change and evolve, and government must be prepared to respond as needed and learn from the lessons over the past two years. As someone who had a 20-year military career, I know that the enemy rarely disappears. They retreat, regroup, and often emerge stronger and more resilient. Covid is proving to be no different.

But like any good army, we have our Covid Generals – our amazing health experts. They warned us in the first quarter of 2022, that we were moving into a critical time in aged care and that the federal government needed to act to prevent a wave of winter deaths from omicron and the flu. All sides of politics were privy to this advice.

In May 2022, Australians voted for a change of government at the federal level. Prime Minister Albanese was elected on a suite of promises to 'act on the urgent challenges facing

Australia' and included in those promises was a commitment to fix the 'growing crisis in aged care'.

I would say to you, nothing is more fundamental to meeting that promise than protecting our most vulnerable and minimising Covid related deaths in our aged care sector.

But recent figures released by the Department of Health has shown that the Albanese government has failed the residents in aged care and their families. Since May 2022, there has been an alarming increase in Covid related deaths. In fact, more Australians have died from Covid over the past eight months under the Albanese government than the total deaths prior to that date.

Figures from the Department of Health confirm there have been 9332 fatalities from the virus since the change of government on May 21 last year, compared to 8471 deaths under the former Coalition government.

Covid-19 deaths in aged care under Labor has also surpassed total deaths under the former government, with 2652 people dying in just eight months compared to 2415 under the Coalition.

Flying in the face of another promise by Prime Minister Albanese to be 'upfront, transparent and honest' with the Australian people, on the eve of the release of this report, Labor changed the reporting requirements to try and keep this information hidden.

Prime Minister Albanese preached to the Australian public in the lead-up to the federal election that the former government's 'neglect in aged care is just unconscionable. We can do better than this. I will make it the Labor Government's mission to fix this.'

To use another military term, the Prime Minister's mission to fix aged care has to be classified as 'failure to execute'. Not only that, Labor has entered a warzone, armed with the best intelligence available and yet their actions have made the situation worse.

In government, as in the military, this critical failure must come with consequences.

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