



14 APR, 2020

Patients avoiding hospital urged to maintain life-saving regimens

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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Patients avoiding hospital urged to maintain life-saving regimens

Melissa Cunningham

People who fear they might overburden hospitals are having heart attacks at home while others who are chronically ill are foregoing potentially lifesaving pathology tests.

Cancer diagnoses and monitoring of immuno-compromised people with chronic health conditions has declined, medical experts warned, as Australia's pathology sector recorded a 40 per cent drop in routine testing in recent weeks.

In a case last week, a Victorian man stayed at home for five days with severe chest pain.

He suffered a life-threatening heart attack and required emergency resuscitation.

He later told doctors he did not go to hospital sooner because he "did not want to be a burden to busy hospital staff".

"The message we really need to get out to the public is that we have the capacity to look after sick people and they are not overburdening us," Associate Professor John Moloney, head of trauma anaesthesia at The Alfred hospital, said.

"If a person needs acute health-care, they should absolutely get acute healthcare. We want people to know that we are here and ready to treat them."

Associate Professor Moloney said patients being admitted to The Alfred's intensive care unit were sicker than they were this time last year and suspected it could be due to some presenting to hospital later.

"There is a perception that we are drowning in work, but right now, there have never been more empty intensive care beds in Victoria," he said.

"One of the key reasons people are allowed to leave their homes is to get medical care if they need it."

Adrian Caramia has type 1 diabetes, chronic kidney disease and

lifelong health issues tied to his battles with prostate and pancreatic cancer.

The 74-year-old has been self-isolating at his large property in Melton South since the pandemic swept Australia.

"When they removed my pancreas, they removed my spleen, so I've basically got no immunity from anything," Mr Caramia said. "If I got COVID-19, that would be the end of me."

Mr Caramia relies on five routine pathology tests each year to monitor his health conditions, but like many people at high-risk of contracting the deadly virus, he is anxious about going out.

"My GP gave me my flu injection in the car last week," he said. "It weighs on my mind heavily that I could catch it, but I will still attend my appointments when I need to. It is a matter of life and death for me, so I need to keep on top of it."

Dr Debra Graves, chief executive of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, said more than 60,000 Australians were not getting the pathology tests they needed every day, with some people missing their appointments virus.

"We've seen a significant decrease in testing across the board from testing for cancer, diabetes, to heart, kidney and liver disease, which is really concerning," Dr Graves said.

Dr Graves stressed it was still safe for Australians to undergo routine tests.

'We are here and ready to treat them.'

Associate Professor John Moloney



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Adrian Caramia is hesitant to leave his home. Photo: Chris Hopkins