


Coronavirus

Inside Victoria's mammoth testing operation

As many staff at this testing site work through their holidays, they are determined to play their part in beating the latest outbreak.

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 17 comments

High on the walls overhead, wooden honour boards list bovine champions dating back to 1921's Shorthorn Sires Memorial winner Lindenow Duke.

For the 99 years since, the Royal Melbourne Showground's big cattle shed has remained the scene for ribbon-awarding glory.

Lately only cars have been herded.

Hastily converted into one of Melbourne's biggest COVID-19 testing sites, the cattle shed and a small army of blue-plastic clad Western Health staff have faced the full force of thousands of people returning from NSW.

By 9.30am Wednesday dozens of cars were queued through the showgrounds as the shed's doors opened and a black BMW led the procession under the honour boards and through the three-stage testing process.

"We first went to Albert Park this morning," the BMW driver said. "They told us it would be an hour-and-a-half wait, so we drove here — and we were the first car in the queue."

By 9.45am the driver and his partner were swabbed and leaving the shed, passing a large final sign as they exited: "You must isolate until you get your results."



COVID testing staff begin work at the Royal Melbourne Show Grounds testing site. Picture: David Caird



AN hour before the first carloads began the wait for a coronavirus test, a workforce of about 50 traffic controllers, nurses, pathologists and doctors huddled on a concrete island in the centre of the shed to put on their PPE.

They were surrounded on all sides by traffic lanes, each marked out by traffic cones and yellow tape.

At 9am Western Health's Showgrounds site lead Kylie Roper stood in the centre of the group and called a team meeting.

The previous five days had had a more than 500 per cent rise in testing and Wednesday was likely to be just as busy.

"There are about 60,000 that crossed the border and some of these guys doing their 14-day isolation will be coming up to their day 11 testing," Ms Roper said.

"Yesterday we found a lot of people that had been exposed who came back into Victoria still hadn't had their initial test because they had been in queues and refused at other places they had been going to, and had been put off being tested.

"You might see quite a few of these coming through."



Nursing staff check each other temperature before starting. Picture: David Caird

As well reminding everyone to add “have you been to the Northern Beaches” to the long list of mandatory questions, testing staff are told to ensure patients leave knowing exactly how long they have to isolate for, who they can call for further information and when they will receive results.

“Because of the influx we are experiencing a little bit of a delay, but there still a pretty good turnaround time,” Ms Roper said.

“So make sure we are setting that expectation of 48-hours.”

Other instructions include a reminder to delete all records of children who pull out of testing at the last moment to avoid confusion over missing tests.

Testers are also warned to be cautious of past COVID-19 patients now presenting for “goodwill” tests. While no longer infectious, many of the patients continue shedding for three months after overcoming the virus and will cause a false-positive test, so should not continue through the queue, Ms Roper says.



Site Lead Kylie Roper conducts a morning briefing to her staff. Picture: David Caird



It takes a workforce of about 50 traffic controllers, nurses, pathologists and doctors to run the site. Picture: David Caird

AT the first station in lane three, nurse Kiel Carlo Cortesiano is in charge of gathering patients' details and electronically recording them so their test can proceed and the results can be sent back correctly.

He knows better than anyone the rush that has descended from the NSW border, the time it has taken some people to get tested, and is seeing a clear pattern by 10am.

"Nowadays it is all because of the NSW outbreak – either they have been exposed or came back from NSW," Mr Cortesiano said.

"We just have had two couples come for their first test – one had just transited and the other had come from an exposure site.

“We just have had two couples come for their first test – one had just transited and the other had come from an exposure site.

“We asked why they had waited until now to get tested, they said the reason was because of the signal on their phone.

“We just give them the benefit of the doubt.”

In lane two nurse Shreesti Shrestha is also checking in patients by asking them questions through their car windows.

“I have seen people who have to go somewhere else who are all asymptomatic, but they want to make sure they are negative so they can face people in a crowd,” Ms Shrestha said.

“That is a really good response from people to come here and get tested.”

One car is attracting extra attention from traffic controllers as well as pathologists in lane one.

Rather than being somebody overly frustrated by delays, it is Marisa Rinaldis’ Chinese crested dog Leo Wie Wie raising eyebrows as he sits on her knee throughout her test.

“I think I just picked up a chill at the beach, so came to get tested,” Ms Rinaldis said.



Marisa Rinaldis waits in her car with her dog Leo Wie Wie to be tested. Picture: David Caird

A career midwife, Ms Roper was drafted in to lead the Showgrounds site when it opened in June amid Victoria's emerging second coronavirus wave.

By July the site was testing up to 1000 people a day, including a record 1108 tests on July 30.

In November the daily testing average dropped back to 220 and, when it further sunk to 150 in mid December, Ms Roper was finally able to return to her management role at the Joan Kirner Women's and Children's Hospital.

Her relief was short-lived though, with Victoria's New Year's Eve border closure leading to a recall to COVID-19's front line.

“The last few days have been a little bit hideous,” she said. “On New Year’s Day they were only supposed to be open until midday, but all these guys absolutely rallied around.”

Western Health’s director of COVID response Kate Cranwell, who initially set up and oversees the Showgrounds site, was recalled from her Christmas holiday when the NSW outbreak spilt across the border.



Kate Cranwell is Director of COVID Response Western Health. Picture: David Caird

“Christmas Day we only operated for four hours and only had minimal staff to operate one lane,” Ms Cranwell said.

“On Sunday we had 50 to 60 people here and were running four lanes. We had a record number of people come through the walk though.”

Confronted by five lanes of queued cars spilling out of the showgrounds, the staff completed 645 tests on January 1, followed by 1027 on January 2, 995 on January 3, 759 on January 4 and 493 on January 6.

When the Herald Sun visited on Wednesday things had finally begun easing at 10.30am, when there were just 17 cars queued at the cattle shed, and another 18 making their way through the stages inside.

However, confirmation of a new mystery case and two exposure sites — the MCG Boxing Day Test and Chadstone Shopping Centre — changed everything.



A woman is tested during the steady line of cars rolling up to the site. Picture: David Caird

After an initial single MCG staff member presented at the Showgrounds walk-through testing service shortly before 11am, he was followed by more than 100 more over the following hours.

By 4.30pm, 492 tests had been undertaken in the Showgrounds site, though patients continued arriving for tests until closure at 7pm.

Crucially, a third of those tested on Wednesday attended after potential exposure at the MCG or Chadstone, just as the pressure of NSW returnees was easing.

Those overseeing the tests are desperately hoping this danger — and those likely in the months ahead — never lead to them having to do 1000 tests a day again.

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The Show's honour boards above their heads have already been deprived the chance to add new champions from 2020, everyone now working in the shed hopes they can soon move on and let the cattle return for 2021.