

Vic doctors' flu supplies 'running out'

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The swine flu outbreak has escalated in Victoria with the first cases outside Melbourne confirmed on Saturday.

Three country residents are among 35 new cases diagnosed since Friday.

There are now 173 Victorians with confirmed swine flu, an increase of 74 in less than 24 hours.

The country cases are all north of Melbourne, with one in each of the shires of Macedon, Mitchell and Indigo.

"They are the first cases in rural and regional Victoria since human swine flu has arrived in our state," Health Minister Daniel Andrews said.

He would not say exactly where the cases were.

The spread outside Melbourne comes as authorities confirmed an Austin Hospital employee had contracted the virus, and doctors warned they were rapidly running out of equipment to protect themselves from infection.

Australian Medical Association (AMA) Victorian president Dr Harry Hemley said an urgent call had gone out for access to national stockpiles of masks, gowns, gloves and Tamiflu.

"We're running out of the necessary equipment to help protect the staff ... from contracting the swine flu and also we're running out of masks also to protect our patients in the waiting rooms as well," he said.

"To help limit the spread, it's very important to have that equipment so we're actually calling on the federal government to release their stockpile."

Mr Andrews said the Victorian government was liaising with the commonwealth to ensure that GPs had the resources needed to contain the virus.

More than 3,000 people are in quarantine in Victoria and seven schools remain closed.

Mr Andrews said 26 of the 35 new cases were children aged five to 18, but none has required hospital treatment.

Health officials will trace the movements of each of the new case over the weekend before making any further decisions about school closures.

The same will occur in the case of the infected Austin hospital employee, who Mr Andrews stressed was in a clerical role and did not have contact with patients.

With healthy people becoming increasingly frustrated in quarantine, Mr Andrews was forced to defend the government's response to the emergency.

He said the flu still had the potential to mutate and refused to discuss the prospect of compensation.

"The approach that we've taken ... is having a direct impact on us containing the spread of the virus.

"As we've always said numbers would grow but they are obviously growing at a much slower rate than they would grow if we were not putting in place the quarantine, isolation and other important containment measures."

Acting chief health officer Dr Rosemary Lester hinted that the state's response may be an overreaction.

She said action had to be proportionate to the risk.

"Obviously that's something we're taking into account - the fact that the disease is relatively mild.

"The (pandemic) plan was probably written for a more severe virus causing the pandemic, this virus is relatively mild and at this stage is no worse than seasonal flu."