

Man at centre of nebuliser row calls for review

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A returned traveller blamed for spreading coronavirus through the Holiday Inn quarantine hotel by using a nebuliser is pushing for an independent review of his case because he does not trust the state government to investigate itself.

It comes as debate rages among scientists over whether a nebuliser really was the source of the outbreak, as the state government has suggested.

The returned traveller, who has chronic asthma, previously told *The Age* he was twice given permission by Victorian health authorities to use the device, which turns liquid medications into a fine mist that can be inhaled, while in quarantine.

This is despite nebulisers being banned for use in most Victorian hospitals after they were suspected to have fuelled serious outbreaks during the state's second wave of coronavirus infections.

"I don't trust the state level of government any more. They've really killed my trust in this system," said the father of one, who asked for his name not to be published to protect his family's identity.

The 38-year-old, who has been discharged from hospital and is with his

family in hotel quarantine, revealed yesterday he had contacted the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care and requested an independent review.

He said his request for an independent investigation was in response to a state government audit of the Holiday Inn incident, which found there was no record of him declaring the device.

The man said he was never asked for his account of events prior to the audit being conducted. He said he was told on Tuesday, after being contacted by the Health Department, that there were three different files for his case.

Emma Cassar, the head of Victoria's hotel quarantine program, said an incident review led by the state's health department and Safer Care Victoria was being undertaken.

When asked by a reporter on Tuesday if she had spoken to the returned traveller, Ms Cassar said she had spoken to the man directly and apologised "for his treatment".

The Victorian man said he declared the nebuliser to staff at the hotel shortly after arriving at the Holiday Inn on January 23.

He also declared the nebuliser to staff at a medi-hotel at Flinders Lane

after being transported there when he tested positive to the virus.

Staff at that hotel initially gave him permission to use the device in his hotel room, before supplying him with an asthmatic spacer a few hours later, he said.

Australian guidelines recommend not using nebulisers on patients with COVID because of fears the device could spray virus-contaminated air through a room and encourage sick patients to cough.

Royal Australasian College of Physicians president John Wilson said the devices posed a clear risk.

However, the International Society of Aerosols in Medicine, along with the British National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and Public Health England all advise there is no risk.

Professor David Morton, associate head of Deakin University's school of engineering, has spent much of his career working with nebulisers. He said the devices did not directly increase the amount of virus-carrying particles in the air.

Lidia Morawska, a world-leading aerosol spread expert, said the bigger problem was that virus-carrying aerosols escaped the hotel room and infected others.

Professor Morawska said if airborne spread had been taken seriously, that would not have happened, even if there was a nebuliser.

Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton said public officials still suspected the use of the nebuliser helped seed the Holiday Inn cluster, but conceded it was difficult to determine with certainty how the outbreak unfolded. A spokeswoman for COVID-19 Quarantine Victoria said investigations into the source of the outbreak were continuing.