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Toughen rules or risk 'cruise ships on land'

Nila Sweeney

High-density apartment buildings are at risk of becoming hotspots for coronavirus infection, like cruise ships, unless there are firm and uniform government directives on hygiene, experts say.

Strata lawyer Amanda Farmer, of Lawyers Chambers, said despite a raft of new regulations and measures on social distancing, specific guidelines for strata residents and managers have been overlooked.

"There have been no government directives on how to keep apartment building common areas properly sanitised, particularly if property managers are no longer on site, which will have a negative impact on the apartment building," she said.

"Specifically, if there is a confirmed case of the virus within a building, what is the process about reporting this to strata management and for that information to be communicated to other residents so they can take extra precautions? These are all issues that need to be addressed.

"There needs to be a clear set of guidelines to follow, otherwise there will be a lack of compliance and the virus could really spread."

In the City of Sydney Council area alone, 80 per cent of residents live in strata buildings.

"These high-density places will soon turn into 'cruise ships on land' unless firm directives are put into place as soon as possible," Ms Farmer said. "Outbreaks are imminent and our buildings are simply ill-equipped to deal with them."

Dr Kathryn Snow, an infectious disease epidemiologist at the University of Melbourne, said apartment buildings were different from cruise ships in that there were no large communal bars or dining areas where people congregated.

However, "there are still risks if people are congregating together in common areas", she said.

Chris Duggan, NSW president of Strata Community Australia, said there was an increased risk of contamination in strata complexes because of the high density of people living in them.

"You have many people passing through the common property and using the lifts, so health issues are obviously the key priority," he said.

"But, unlike cruise ships, where people were sharing lots of facilities and no awareness, strata residents are acutely aware of what to do."

Mr Duggan said strata managers were bracing for a greater level of lockdowns and urgently needed guidelines on how to deal with them.

"We need habitation guidelines if there is a full lockdown. We need to sort out what the protocol is and how to keep it consistent," he said. "We need guidelines on how to deal with the increase in antisocial behaviours such as noise, smoking or even food odours.

"What we don't want to see is individual strata schemes making ad hoc plans around how they manage their strata. So we are looking to get a set of consistent guidelines from the government."

According to the Australian Strata Data Report 2018, there are more than 316,000 strata schemes in this country, with more than 2.2 million people – about 9 per cent of the population – living in apartments.

About half of all apartment households (48 per cent) are renters. In NSW, the state most affected by coronavirus, more than 1.1 million residents live in more than 800,000 residential lots.

There are about 80,000 residential schemes in NSW where more than half of apartment residents are between 20 and 39, the age bracket that appears to be the main carrier of the virus.



High-density blocks need guidelines or risk being hotspots. PHOTO: JAMES ALCOCK