

Email from Ashley Bloomfield to Frontline Health Workers

Kia ora koutou

Today marks the halfway point of the four-week period of the Level 4 response.

We are cautiously optimistic that all our efforts are delivering the outcome we're looking for. We know that we are certainly in a better position than we would have been if we hadn't put the measures we have in place to stamp out COVID-19 in New Zealand.

I know many of you will be feeling the strain, whether you're at the frontline or in a supporting role in this situation. We are all adapting to new ways of doing things, an environment where personal risk to ourselves is heightened, and – for many – a larger and more urgent workload.

I'm very aware of the impact COVID-19 is having on frontline health workers and we continue to actively look at what additional support is needed for our health workforce. We all need to take care of our mental, as well as our physical, well-being.

Please ensure you, your staff and colleagues, and your families know how and where to get any support you need.

Mental health and wellbeing

Yesterday, we launched [Getting Through Together](#) which is an online platform with information and resources about how to take care of your mental health. This is the first of a range of initiatives to support the mental wellbeing of New Zealanders and focuses on helping people understand how they can look after themselves and others. It includes a section that is specifically for frontline workers.

These resources can be accessed online or over the phone and are intended to supplement rather than replace the support that New Zealanders already receive from their doctors, mental health professionals and other services.

Flu vaccinations update

You may be aware that we have brought the start of the vaccination programme forward by two weeks. In this early phase we are focused on providing vaccinations for those who are most vulnerable – those over 65, pregnant women and others with underlying health conditions, as well as healthcare and other front-line workers.

We previously said vaccinations should only be provided for these priority groups until 13 April and open up to the general population after that. In order to ensure that everyone in the priority populations has had adequate opportunity to receive a vaccination, this date has been moved to 27 April.

We urge providers to ensure Māori and Pacific communities are protected, as their flu vaccination rates have historically been significantly lower than those of the wider population.

We have heard reports of some providers vaccinating outside of the priority groups. Every vaccine given to a healthy adult is one that can't be given to someone at greater risk of serious illness. Please let's all work together to protect our most vulnerable, as part of our overall COVID-19 response.

Prioritising contact tracing for essential workers

Our National Contact Tracing Centre is now prioritising contact tracing for all essential workers, as they will come into close contact with people who are not in their bubble in the course of their work. If an essential worker has tested positive, we will expedite the close contact tracing calls and we will inform their close contacts as quickly as possible.

Please ask your people to self-identify as essential workers if they come forward for testing.

Updated case definition

Yesterday afternoon, the Ministry released updated advice for health professionals on the COVID-19 case definition. It reflects a decision to test all symptomatic close contacts of probable and confirmed cases, to aid our understanding of the spread of COVID-19.

We also clarified that all essential workers are a priority group for testing as they are in contact with people outside their household bubble and therefore at increased likelihood of becoming infected – and if infected, more likely to pass the virus onto others. More information can be found [on our website](#).

Into the future

One thing I'd like you all to start thinking about is what we are learning from the present situation about how we are delivering care and support, and how we can maximise those benefits going forward. There are ways we're delivering care now as a result of Level 4, which are going to continue to be of value in the future.

I know that some local Alzheimers organisations have started offering carer support, memory cafes and Cognitive Stimulation Therapy programmes online using Zoom. Primary care has also done this particularly well through virtual consultations – so how might we build that technology into our new ways of working in the future?

Thank you again for all your hard work and aroha. I'm proud to work in a health and disability support sector that continues to provide the best level of care for the community in these exceptional times. Please pass my thanks on to your teams, and I will continue to keep you up to date as we unite against COVID-19.

Ngâ mihi nui
Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Director-General of Health

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