

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF HEALTH, Dr ASHLEY BLOOMFIELD – 4 AUGUST 2020

Kia ora koutou

I'd like to acknowledge everyone's hard work in supporting our goal to increase the level of community testing, which is a critical part of our COVID-19 elimination strategy.

The Ministry has been working across the system to ensure testing is widely available for people and to support uptake of tests across our communities. By 31 July we had carried out more than 465,000 tests in New Zealand, which is an impressive effort, but we need to remain focused on ensuring good testing rates across the country.

Laboratories are processing significant numbers of COVID-19 tests as quickly as possible – I want to thank all laboratory staff for the critical role you play in keeping New Zealanders safe.

Our biggest risk of COVID-19 re-entering the community is at our border. We have seen how quickly infection can spread within communities, cities, and states overseas. There is still a pandemic raging around the globe and while our strict border controls form our first line of defence from the virus, we need to be sure it has not crept undetected into our communities.

The results from a recent survey of GPs show that half of the 800 GPs surveyed had seen patients who declined a COVID test and that the proportion of patients that declined was on average 25%.

The main focus is on testing as many people with COVID-19 related symptoms as possible. Please encourage those who are offered a test to accept that test so that we can ensure that if there is a case out there it is detected prior to it spreading.

WHAKAMAUA: MAORI HEALTH ACTION PLAN 2020-2025

[Whakamaua: Maori Health Action Plan 2020-2025](#) is the implementation plan for He Korowai Oranga, New Zealand's Māori Health Strategy. This action plan was released on Friday 31 July and will help us achieve better health outcomes for Māori by setting the Government's direction for Māori health advancement over the next five years.

The Ministry of Health has an important leadership role to play in creating an environment that enables Māori to live healthier, happier lives, and we take that role seriously. I encourage you consider how this action plan can support your ongoing work towards improving Māori health and wellbeing.

COVID TRACER APP UPDATED

Fast and effective contact tracing is our second line of defence against COVID-19. Keeping track of our movements with the NZ COVID Tracer app supports this by giving contact tracers a head-start and making it easier to alert people to potential exposure events.

Last Thursday we released an update to the app to make it a more comprehensive contact tracing tool and increase the number of New Zealanders who can use it.

The main new feature is the ability to add manual entries to your digital diary, either at the time or retrospectively. This means you can now use the app to maintain a complete – and private – record of everywhere you go.

We've updated our [website](#) with the latest information about the app and have uploaded a short video on how it works, which of course you are welcome to share with your stakeholders and clients.

FLU TRACKING

FluTracking is a simple online initiative that helps monitor flu activity in New Zealand by showing how prevalent flu-like symptoms are in individual areas. We are able to use this data to make sure resources, such as vaccinations, are where they are needed most. It is also an important part of our COVID-19 surveillance.

Public participation in surveillance of influenza-like illness has declined from a peak of 70,000 FluTracking survey respondents at Alert Level 4, which is now down to 50,000 respondents.

Responding to the survey takes just seconds and becoming a FluTracker is easy – register at flutracking.net. All information gathered is confidential and identifiable data is not shared.

NZ-BASED INTERNATIONAL AIR CREW AND COVID-19

I want to reassure you that appropriate safety precautions are in place to protect NZ-based international air crew from COVID-19 and thereby also protect their families and communities. During their flights, international air crew are required to wear face masks and gloves in their interactions with passengers. They are also required to practice regular hand hygiene.

All air crew staying overnight in another country or territory are transported through the airport and to their accommodation by private vehicle wearing a mask, and they are not allowed to leave their room at all until they are transported back to the airport.

On arrival back in New Zealand, international aircrew undertake a health declaration and health screen; and use a safe corridor to move through the airport. Air crew living in New Zealand and returning from high-risk layovers are required to self-isolate, have a COVID-19 test on day 2 after their arrival in New Zealand and continue to self-isolate until the results of that test have been returned.

It is worth noting that there have been no cases of COVID-19 among international air crew since we eliminated community transmission over three months ago.

These controls are constantly monitored and updated to reflect new information and best practice. We work closely with Air New Zealand and I want to thank the air crew for supporting these measures.

PRIVACY BREACH FINDINGS

The [findings of an investigation into COVID-19 active cases privacy breach](#) were released by the State Services Commission last week.

The Ministry has been in contact with those people affected by this privacy breach to apologise and to keep them informed about what has been happening.

The Ministry is taking a range of actions in response to the breach, which included immediately ceasing the release of this information to external parties who had previously been getting that information when there were cases of COVID-19 in the community.

Every day, we have people working in our health and disability sector who have access to New Zealanders' health information, and I want to thank you for taking your responsibility of protecting privacy very seriously.

Ngā mihi nui
Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Director-General of Health