

Message from the Director-General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield – 16 April 2020

Kia ora koutou

The data released this Tuesday on COVID-19 cases involving the infection of health care workers is both timely and critical to our work. The data indicates a relatively small number of cases of transmission from a patient or resident to a health care worker. This is a reflection of the huge amount of work across the health system to ensure staff are protected. Protection includes access to and appropriate use of PPE and is also a result of having strong infection prevention measures in place. I appreciate your continued effort and focus on this.

Aged residential care (ARC) facilities

The death of a patient has an impact on all health professionals and care workers, and I am mindful that the level of attention on the recent COVID-19 deaths has created extra pressure on those staff personally involved. It was heartening that even in their grief, some of the families took the time to acknowledge and thank those nurses, carers, doctors and other staff that took care of their loved ones.

There are more than 650 ARC facilities nationwide, and as I mentioned in my 1pm stand-up on Tuesday, there has been excellent care and preparation across the aged care sector. This is highlighted by the fact that in New Zealand, relatively few facilities have been affected by COVID-19 compared to other countries.

The Ministry has commissioned a short review of our experience to date with preventing and managing COVID-19 in ARC facilities. This will include facilities that have had cases of COVID-19 so that we may understand what measures/processes have worked well and to identify where there are opportunities for improvements. The review will also include similar facilities where there have been no cases and will be carried out with input from the Aged Care Association.

PPE supply

For health and disability sector workers, all PPE is ordered through DHBs. A national distribution system has been operating for the past two weeks and on Tuesday a national ordering process was established. DHBs are responsible for coordinating all orders and deliveries for community health and disability providers in their region.

We expect to receive approximately 10 million items of PPE this week of which 9 million are procedure masks or equivalent – next week we expect to receive a further 18 million items. There have been some instances in the media of health workers reportedly unable to access PPE. I am confident that we have sufficient stock of PPE in New Zealand and we have a good distribution process in place. I encourage any workers who have issues accessing PPE to escalate their concerns within their organisation and to also involve their local union representative.

Flu vaccine delay in the South

Unfortunately, bad weather on the weekend delayed vaccines being shipped to the distribution centre in Christchurch for subsequent delivery across the South Island.

The Christchurch distribution centre's vaccine stock is being used to partly or fully fill existing orders. We flew 5,000 doses down on Tuesday but there's likely to still be some delays in distribution for the South Island this week.

We have a further 123,000 doses of vaccine due to be released for distribution around the country on Monday. In total, 1,073,919 influenza vaccines have been distributed to vaccination providers as of Tuesday this week.

Sharing new mental health and wellbeing resources

It's encouraging to see the uptake of online resources we've made available over the past few weeks to support New Zealanders to take care of their mental health. More than 34,000 people have visited the [Getting Through Together](#) campaign website, and more than 47,000 people visited [Sparklers](#), which has resources specifically for children.

Yesterday, we also launched three new online self-help tools: [Melon](#), [Mentemia](#) and [Staying on Track](#), which all provide different levels of support and practical strategies to cope with the stress and disruption of day-to-day life that we are all experiencing at the moment.

Thank you to those who are sharing these links among your networks – it's really important that people know they have support available during this difficult time if they need it. We continue to work rapidly to scale-up the mental health and wellbeing support that is available for some of our at-risk communities, including Māori, Pacific peoples, older adults, people with underlying health conditions, people with mental health and addiction needs, pregnant women and new mothers, and our front-line workers.

Technology and telehealth

Over recent weeks there has been a rapid shift toward virtual health services and online consultations as the sector has quickly moved to find new ways of working.

To support this, last week the Ministry of Health introduced [new rules](#) to make it easier to issue signatureless prescriptions through the New Zealand Electronic Prescription Service (NZePS). If you are not already using the service, please send an email to our [Online Helpdesk](#) with NZePS in the subject line.

Plunket is one of a number of organisations that has adapted quickly by providing virtual support services. Plunket nurses are connecting through technology to make sure all mums, families and whānau with new-born babies have the care and support they need.

There are a range of telehealth resources on the [New Zealand Telehealth Forum](#) and on the Ministry's [website](#) to support you.

Health and care 'surge' workforce

While some health providers may have their own workforce to draw on when extra staff are needed, the surge workforce is a pool of health and care workers who are available to be used if there are employers in your area who need extra staff during this time.

We now have over 9,100 workers from around the country, including doctors, nurses, care workers, med lab scientists, dentists, dietetics, paramedics, pharmacists, medical/nursing students, physiotherapists, chiropractors, psychologists and psychotherapists. To date, 6 workers have already been placed into new roles, and we are currently managing 27 employer requests that have been deemed moderate or high priority. Priority continues to be given to aged residential care facilities.

If you know any organisations that are looking to employ extra staff, or any workers looking to return to the workforce to help with the COVID-19 response, please let them know they can find out more information and register their details on our [surge workforce website](#).

COVID-19 Health and Disability System Response Plan

Yesterday the Ministry released a framework to prepare for and manage the national response to COVID-19 in New Zealand. The plan is aimed primarily at the health and disability sector to inform operational planning and ensure a coordinated and consistent response. It is available here on our website <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/covid-19-health-and-disability-system-response-plan>.

Planning should now be well underway across the sector to understand how you will operate when we begin to transition through the different alert levels. Whatever reduced restrictions look like for your organisation, a focus on safety and protection will need to remain until Covid-19 has been eliminated.

As always, my thanks and appreciation for all you are doing to keep yourselves and New Zealanders safe and supported at this time.

Ngā mihi nui
Dr Ashley Bloomfield