

New Zealand: COVID-19 cases highlight risk of new outbreak

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29 January 2021

Over the past week three people in New Zealand have tested positive for the more contagious South African variant of COVID-19. They had earlier returned negative test results prior to being released from two weeks of mandatory isolation in Auckland's Pullman Hotel, one of several hotels that are serving as managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities for people returning from overseas.

A 56-year-old woman recently returned from Europe left the hotel on January 13 and began developing mild symptoms two days later while travelling in the Northland region. She tested positive for the virus on January 23. On January 26 two more Aucklanders, a father and daughter, who had left the hotel around the same time, also tested positive.

The cases highlight the ongoing risk of a serious outbreak in New Zealand, despite Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government being lauded in the international media for supposedly stamping out the coronavirus. Under pressure from workers, Ardern imposed a relatively strict lockdown in March–April 2020, which limited the number of COVID-19 deaths to 25. However, as the pandemic continues to rage out of control in large parts of the world, with 2.2 million dead so far, no country can be considered isolated from the virus.

There is no evidence that the three returned travellers transmitted COVID-19 to anyone else in New Zealand, but the situation remains highly uncertain. Some school principals told Radio NZ yesterday that they were making plans for a return to remote learning in case a new community outbreak is detected. For now, the government has not announced any lockdowns or other restrictions.

The new cases quickly revealed that the Labour Party-led government has failed to properly equip the health

system to respond rapidly to an outbreak. *Newshub* reported on January 25 that “there were wait times of more than six hours and police were called to turn people away” at understaffed COVID-19 testing stations in Northland. Leanne, who had visited the same locations as the Northland case and had developed symptoms, said: “Having a whole year now of experience with this virus should have prepared us far better than this.”

As of Friday more than 36,000 tests had been completed since the positive cases were confirmed.

Vaccines are not yet available and *Stuff* reported yesterday that “the Ministry of Health does not yet have a vaccination target for border, MIQ and health workers, or a time frame in which it will aim to vaccinate 70 percent of the population.” COVID Response Minister Chris Hipkins told the media that vaccination was “likely to be a year-long process.”

In the meantime, MIQ hotels present a clear risk of further outbreaks. There are currently more than 4,000 people staying in 32 MIQ facilities, and more than 4,000 staff. Yesterday there were 67 positive COVID cases among the returned travellers.

The source of infection for the three cases who stayed in the Pullman Hotel is still unconfirmed. Officials suspect they caught the virus from another person, or from a surface, shortly before the end of their two-week isolation period. The hotel is not taking any new returnees and people currently staying there are being mostly confined to their rooms while the cases are investigated.

Candice Botha, whose two daughters have been staying at the Pullman after returning from South Africa, told *Stuff* yesterday that one of them had contracted COVID-19 at the hotel and the pair will now have their isolation period extended. Botha said they

had witnessed a “clear lack of social distancing” at the hotel, including guests playing basketball and running around.

There have been many warnings about inadequate staffing and safety procedures at the MIQ facilities. On January 21, *Stuff* reported that a woman quit her job at a MIQ hotel in Christchurch because “she didn’t feel enough was being done to stop workers getting COVID-19 from guests.” There were multiple instances of people not wearing masks, touching surfaces and mixing with others.

Microbiologist Duncan McMillan, who was isolated at the Novotel hotel near Auckland Airport, wrote to Minister Hipkins saying it was “as leaky as a sieve.” He said Defence Force personnel, who have been deployed to guard MIQ facilities, were not properly trained: “They have no idea on how to be careful to the extent that is necessary, and there is seemingly little oversight by trained microbiology professionals.”

Auckland Professor of Medicine Des Gorman told Radio NZ it was “dumb good luck” that the 56-year-old Northland woman had not been a “super-spreader,” like approximately 15–20 percent of coronavirus cases. He said New Zealand remained “very, very vulnerable” with an unvaccinated population and “a very leaky border.”

Gorman called for a temporary border closure to high-risk countries while quarantine facilities are improved, saying: “If you’re coming back from the UK then you shouldn’t be at the Pullman in the middle of Auckland city.”

University of Auckland scientist David Welch told the *Conversation* on January 27 that the Northland case was the ninth incursion of the virus into the community from a returned traveller since August 2020, when an outbreak in Auckland caused a number of deaths.

Welch wrote that the use of “makeshift” MIQ facilities in the country’s biggest city, “rather than purpose-built facilities,” combined with “the increasing prevalence of the new variants worldwide meant it was inevitable we’d eventually see [the virus] in the community. Unless there are major improvements at the border, we can expect more cases.”

Epidemiologist Nick Wilson has called for purpose-built MIQ facilities and earlier this month told *Newstalk ZB* it was “crazy” to use hotels in Auckland. He also strongly criticised the practice of using buses to

transport MIQ guests from central city hotels to a sports field across town for exercise, telling *Stuff*: “The authorities are not recognising how infectious this pandemic virus is—and with the new variants it is even more so.”

Another outbreak could have devastating consequences if it is not quickly suppressed. The public health system is severely under-resourced after decades of austerity, and already crowded hospitals could be overwhelmed—as has happened throughout Europe, Brazil, the United States and elsewhere.

Auckland Mayor Phil Goff and Minister Hipkins both stressed this week that a lockdown in the city is unlikely, with Goff telling the media it would be considered as a “last resort.” Prime Minister Ardern has previously assured big business that her government will aim to avoid further nationwide lockdowns, so as not to disrupt profit-making.



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