

Omicron case identified in New Zealand

Tom Peters
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On Thursday, the New Zealand government confirmed that a case of the extremely infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19 has been identified in a traveller staying at a managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) hotel in Christchurch. The traveller arrived from Germany, via Dubai, on December 10.

Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield told the media yesterday that New Zealand was “very well-prepared” and “we have every intention of keeping Omicron out of the country for as long as possible.”

In fact, the Labour Party-led government has been dismantling New Zealand’s public health defences in recent months, ignoring scientists’ advice and bowing to the demands of big business for an end to all impediments on profit-making.

In October, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the government would abandon its previous elimination policy, which had limited COVID-19 deaths to 26 until August this year. Since then, another 22 people have died.

On December 3, the government ended what remained of the lockdown in Auckland, the country’s largest city and centre of the outbreak. This week, the boundary around the city was lifted, allowing Aucklanders to travel around the country over the holiday period. Government ministers have admitted that this means Delta will spread everywhere.

According to the Ministry of Health, as of yesterday there had been 2,194 people infected in the last 21 days in the community, and 24 cases among overseas arrivals in MIQ. There are roughly 100 cases being recorded each day. Only symptomatic people are encouraged to get a test, meaning the real numbers are likely much higher.

Restrictions at the border have been significantly eased. In mid-November, the mandatory period that returnees must stay in MIQ was halved from 14 to 7

days. Bloomfield said the person with Omicron and others who travelled on the same flight would have their MIQ period extended to 10 days.

The current plan is that from January 17, double-vaccinated New Zealanders entering the country will be allowed to skip MIQ and “self-isolate” at home. On Monday, Ardern said this plan would be reviewed in January in light of the Omicron variant, which is spreading at a much faster pace than Delta internationally and is likely to become the dominant variant.

Ardern emphasised, however: “We haven’t changed our plans. We haven’t changed the timelines we’ve set out.”

In neighbouring Australia, where state and federal governments have removed most public health restrictions, Omicron is contributing to a surge in cases and severe illnesses.

Asked if he would recommend that the government impose lockdowns if Omicron is detected outside of MIQ, Bloomfield said yesterday: “We’d just have to see what the situation was.” He declared that New Zealand’s vaccination rate was much higher compared with August, when the Delta outbreak began.

Such reassurances are entirely misleading. Data from South Africa has found that two shots of the Pfizer vaccine—which the New Zealand government refers to as “fully vaccinated”—provided only 33 percent efficacy against symptomatic infections and only 70 percent protection against hospitalization, substantial drops from all previous variants.

So far, about 90 percent of eligible New Zealanders have received two vaccine doses, which is 75 percent of the whole population. As of yesterday, 184,377 people had received a third “booster” shot, less than 4 percent of the population.

Children under 12 are still ineligible for the vaccine, and schools and early childhood centres are a major

source of transmission. The Ministry of Education falsely claims that children are at low risk from Delta. The situation in South Africa indicates that children are more likely to need hospitalisation if they contract Omicron.

Experts, including vaccinologist Dr Helen Petousis-Harris and epidemiologist Michael Baker, have called on the government to shorten the period of time people need to wait between the second and third doses, which is currently set at 6 months.

Speaking to Radio NZ, Professor Baker also warned that under the current plan to lift MIQ requirements in mid-January, “Omicron would get in very, very rapidly.” He said the government should “use all the tools available to decrease the risk or minimise the risk of this variant getting loose in New Zealand.”

As in other countries, the government, media and business representatives have encouraged complacency about both Delta and Omicron. The lifting of the Auckland boundary was greeted with celebratory headlines like “Travellers rejoice as they resume work, reunite with family” and “Freedom! Thousands fleeing Auckland as border lifts.”

A *New Zealand Herald* editorial said Auckland had “shown its resilience and residents collectively rolled up their sleeves and got on with protecting themselves and the community.” It brushed aside concerns about the new variant, saying “it’s already known that booster shots [which hardly anyone has received] are effective against Omicron infections.”

In fact, Dr Fran Priddy, executive director of Vaccine Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand, told the Science Media Centre (SMC) yesterday that a third Pfizer dose could improve vaccine effectiveness to about 75 percent against Omicron, according to early data from the UK. Some experts believe an Omicron-specific vaccine may be needed to prevent widespread infection, hospitalisation and deaths.

The World Health Organization and experts internationally have criticised the attempts to claim, without any evidence, that Omicron may be “milder.” Professor Mike Bunce from the NZ Institute of Environmental Science and Research told the SMC: “Even if Omicron (or another variant) results in half the hospitalisation rate, twice as many infections will place the same net demand on the hospital system.”

COVID-19 modeller Professor Michael Plank has

estimated that if Omicron enters the community, assuming minimal public health measures such as masking, and 93 percent of over-12s vaccinated with just two doses, New Zealand could see a peak of about 50,000 cases per day. This would drop to 30,000 if everyone aged over 45 received a third dose. Plank told *Stuff* this was an “optimistic” scenario; if the variant turned out to be even more resistant to vaccines, the daily cases could reach 80,000.

Meanwhile, business organisations, such as Hospitality New Zealand and the Auckland Business Chamber, as well as the opposition National and ACT Parties, have called for the government to move faster to lift the minimal restrictions that remain. Recently-installed National Party leader Chris Luxon is also demanding the immediate removal of MIQ requirements for double-vaccinated New Zealanders returning from so-called low-risk countries.

Protests against all restrictions and vaccine mandates are also continuing, with 2,000 people rallying outside parliament yesterday, led by the far-right Destiny Church.

The Labour government is moving to appease these forces. Under the “traffic light” framework that has replaced lockdowns, Auckland is currently in “red,” which limits indoor gatherings to 100 people. Ardern says the city will move to “orange” on December 31, meaning this limit will then be scrapped on New Year’s eve.



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