

New Zealand scientists express alarm over Omicron threat

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12 January 2022

A growing number of New Zealand's COVID-19 experts are warning that the country is unprepared for an Omicron outbreak that is likely to have fatal consequences. Otago University professors Nick Wilson and Michael Baker have called the highly transmissible variant a "huge threat" and declared it is only a "matter of weeks" before it sweeps into the country.

While reported new community cases of the Delta variant dropped to a daily low of 14 on January 11, more than 90 Omicron cases were detected at the border last week, with three cases entering the country.

Over 300 border-related COVID-19 cases are currently in Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ), including 65 new arrivals on Wednesday alone. Genome sequencing is under way to ascertain which of the recent arrivals are infected with Omicron, but it is already the dominant strain internationally.

Public health expert Peter Davis told *Stuff* on Wednesday that with 10 times the number of infected arrivals at the border than in the past, "the authorities may have all but thrown in the towel on preventing a community (and inevitably nationwide) outbreak" of the Omicron variant. "We need to turn down the tap urgently," Davis declared.

Wilson and Baker also called for a "significant tightening" of the numbers entering the country. "The priority is to have a tighter border so that we don't have to vaccinate kids and conduct a booster program during an outbreak," Wilson declared.

The country's inadequate MIQ facilities, which are all situated in the middle of major cities, have proved to be an ongoing problem, including with infected people regularly escaping. Wilson told the *Guardian* on January 10 he was "perplexed" that poor ventilation and shared spaces within MIQ had not been fixed and

the resulting "high risk" of an Omicron outbreak was "unacceptable."

To relieve the pressure on MIQ, Wilson said, the government ought to require rapid antigen testing for travellers immediately prior to allowing them on flights, and cap the number of travellers coming from high-risk countries such as the UK, where Omicron rates have skyrocketed.

Wilson added that despite New Zealand's high vaccination rates, the number of adults who had received a booster dose of the vaccine remained dangerously low. He noted that the vaccine rollout for children between five and 11 still had not begun.

Wilson sharply criticised the Labour-led government's "traffic light" COVID-19 management system, which replaced more broadly-based lockdowns in December, as "not fit for purpose" with Omicron. The system intentionally allows significant social interaction for vaccinated people in the community, even when COVID is prevalent.

David Welch from Auckland University also said that the government's "assumptions" around immunity from vaccinations that underpin the traffic light system "do not hold for Omicron."

Baker called for the government to rapidly reinstate an amended version of the previous alert level system. "The traffic light system won't help us very much because it was never designed to dampen down transmission, it was only designed to nudge people towards vaccination," Baker said.

Baker warned that if the government sticks to its current timetable of largely opening the border with Australia in March, the country could expect the rapid spread of Omicron and "very high levels of absenteeism" at workplaces for several months. With the borders open, he warned, "we would be expecting a

more severe flu season and the other respiratory infections that dominate in winter.”

On Tuesday, another epidemiologist joined those calling on the government to delay re-opening schools, which is due in less than three weeks. Dr Amanda Kvalsvig, at the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago, said Omicron had triggered an “avalanche” of child cases overseas, at higher rates than previously seen in this pandemic.

“Schools and hospitals are struggling to manage the high rates of infection and there are rising concerns about post-acute effects in children, including Long Covid and an increase in autoimmune problems like diabetes,” she warned. “Here in New Zealand we have an opportunity to break that pattern, but we need to be decisive and move fast.”

Her comments came after Education and COVID Response Minister Chris Hipkins told the *New Zealand Herald* he wanted students back in class fulltime this year to avoid more disruption to their learning. Hipkins claimed that mandated vaccinations of staff, and an expected 90 percent vaccine coverage for students, justify re-openings.

In fact, the Ardern-led government has openly embraced the homicidal “herd immunity” policy of ruling elites internationally and is letting the deadly virus spread. Hipkins declared that the “best scenario” for New Zealand is “COVID mutating over time to become more transmissible but much less severe.” Last month he flatly stated: “We are moving to a different space now, where we are going to have COVID-19 in the community.”

In a sign of increasingly vocal opposition among the scientific community, Kvalsvig bluntly declared that to stop school outbreaks, children needed to be able to stay home if they had symptoms or tested positive. “That means that working parents need sick leave support to stay home too, and children who’re at home for longer than a few days will need educational and social support,” she said.

Kvalsvig added there are a number of key protections that needed to take place before sending children back to school. They included high vaccination coverage among all school-aged children, effective ventilation in schools, high-grade masks, access to rapid antigen testing (RAT) and support to stay at home. “Worldwide and in NZ, children are the least-vaccinated age group.

This immunity gap needs to be closed as quickly as possible,” she said.

There has been no reaction from the Labour government to these warnings. Indicating a criminal level of complacency, the cabinet remains officially on holiday and is not due to meet until January 17. Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson flatly declared that at this stage “schools will reopen as planned,” and encouraged parents to get their children vaccinated. In fact, vaccines for children have only just arrived in the country.

Deep concern is building up in the working class, including among teachers and parents. Tahuna Intermediate principal Simon Clarke told the *Herald* that this year would be “much harder” than last. “The next part will be when we’re actually trying to deal with it within our schools, and teachers are getting sick, children are getting sick, and trying to keep the school open, which I think is what the ministry want us to do,” he said.



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