

# New Zealand's leading health officials resign as COVID deaths mount

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Three leading officials in New Zealand's Ministry of Health have announced their resignations, in the middle of the country's Omicron surge that has overwhelmed hospitals and is killing 10 to 20 people per day.

On Wednesday, Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield, one of the most well-known public faces of the Labour Party-led government's COVID-19 response, announced he would step down in July—a year earlier than he had previously indicated he would leave. A few hours later, the Ministry of Health confirmed that Director of Public Health Dr Caroline McElnay, and Deputy Director of Public Health Dr Niki Stefanogiannis were resigning at the end of the week.

Media reports attributed the resignations to “stress” and “burnout.” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who has appeared alongside Bloomfield in countless press conferences during the pandemic, said on Instagram that he “wanted to spend time with his family, and that's the least we owe him.” McElnay blandly told a press conference she also wanted to spend time with family.

In a worried article, the *New Zealand Herald* said the sudden departures would leave a “giant hole” and “raise questions about what impact their vacancies will have in a pandemic that shows no sign of ending, with possible resurgences in cases in coming months, including over winter, and new variants inevitably arriving here.”

Whatever the exact reasons for the leadership exodus, it comes amid an historic health crisis caused by the government's decision to embrace the “let it rip” approach to COVID-19, which has led to millions of deaths worldwide. Last October, Ardern announced the end of the elimination policy that saved thousands of lives during the first two years of the pandemic. The

government promised big business that schools and businesses would be reopened and there would be no more lockdowns.

Bloomfield and McElnay had the undoubtedly stressful task of defending the government's criminal policy decisions in the Ministry of Health's regular media conferences. While none of those leaving has expressed any disagreement with the government's approach, the departures came soon after the removal of nearly all remaining public health restrictions.

At the start of April, vaccine mandates and passes were scrapped and contact tracing systems were dismantled. The government has abandoned any pretence of trying to stop the virus, and COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins has said deaths are inevitable.

The Ministry of Health reports that 466 people have died with COVID during the pandemic as of today—an increase of more than 100 in the past week. The vast majority of deaths followed the government's abandonment of the zero COVID policy. At the start of October 2021, only 32 people had died of the virus over nearly two years.

The death toll has now exceeded the projection made by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) in January of 400 deaths by May 1. It has also surpassed a forecast by NZ-based modellers of up to 300 COVID deaths by the end of April.

The mounting toll demolishes the claims made by Ardern, Bloomfield, McElnay and other government spokespeople, that the virus could be allowed to circulate in the community and people would be protected by vaccinations. In fact, just over half of all New Zealanders have received a necessary third (or booster) dose. Moreover, it is well-known that vaccines alone cannot stop the virus from spreading and causing

ongoing deaths and severe illnesses, including Long COVID, which can damage the brain, heart and other organs.

The Ministry of Health has pointed to a decline in daily cases in recent weeks—from roughly 20,000 to about 10,000-15,000 per day—but the figures are not reliable. University of Auckland professor Rod Jackson told the *New Zealand Herald* that since people are now expected to self-report the results of rapid antigen tests (RATs), the daily case numbers are meaningless. He said the accuracy of RATs can be as low as 50 percent.

Meanwhile, the crisis in public hospitals is unprecedented, affecting not just COVID patients, but others whose treatment has been postponed. There are 626 people in hospital with the virus, down from a peak of over 1,000 recently. This week, however, Auckland District Health Board (DHB) managers said hospitals are still only able to perform urgent surgical procedures, due to chronic staff shortages.

On April 3, a few days before Bloomfield and company announced their departures, TVNZ's "Sunday" program aired a damning report on the crisis facing nurses. "Already underpaid and overworked before the pandemic, burnout is rife and resignations flooding in," presenter Miriama Kamo said. One nurse said there were frequently shifts "where we should have four [staff rostered] plus our team leader, and we're down on the rosters to one and two."

Health Minister Andrew Little said there is a shortage of 3,000 nurses in the hospital system and 1,000 in the aged care sector. Last year, Chalmers Rest Home in New Plymouth closed its hospital wing after it received zero applications for its nursing vacancies. Seventeen elderly people were forced to find somewhere else to live.

Little declared that nurses "should not feel they have to" work to the point of burnout and it was up to "their managers" to prevent this. The government has refused, for years, to address the crisis in hospitals. Following a nationwide nurses' strike in 2018, the government, assisted by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), imposed a sellout deal that failed to address the staffing shortage.

On the *One News* Facebook page, hundreds of people commented on the report, supporting the nurses and denouncing the government. Marilyn, a registered nurse, wrote that Little was "passing the buck" and she

had "lost count" of how many times governments have promised nurses "pay parity" with other occupations.

Another comment, with more than 50 likes, said "Little should resign. He is out of his depth in everything. People are suffering. Only going to get worse." Several comments criticised the government's immigration restrictions, which have made it much harder for hospitals to recruit workers from overseas.

In response to a comment defending the NZNO, Serjio commented: "This is a union working for the government and the NZNO board members," not for nurses. The NZNO supports Labour's agenda of letting the virus spread; none of the unions have called for a return to the zero COVID policy.

The capitalist class and its representatives, from the parliamentary parties to the union bureaucracy, insist that no public health measures can be allowed to disrupt the "economy," meaning the extraction of profit from the working class. Workers are told they must accept hundreds, perhaps thousands, more deaths and debilitating illnesses from a virus that can be eliminated.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand call on workers to reject this agenda of mass infection. Contact us to discuss how to fight for a fully-resourced elimination strategy, including through the formation of new organisations: workplace safety committees controlled by workers.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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