

Strengthening our preparedness, readiness and response plans and maintaining vigilance

7 November 2020

Te Marae Ora is continuing to monitor the COVID-19 situation in New Zealand.

Following the recent reporting of two COVID-19 cases who were workers at the managed isolation facility in Christchurch, another worker at the managed isolation facility in Auckland tested positive for the COVID-19 virus yesterday.

“What is important for us to understand is New Zealand’s public health response regarding such incidents”, says Secretary of Health, Dr Josephine Aumea Herman. “Public health authorities follow contact tracing, testing, and quarantine/isolation protocols that aim to contain and mitigate the public health risk, and further spread of the virus in the community”.

“Based on the information that we have at hand, the public health risk to the Cook Islands population is low, therefore our Supervised Quarantine process for all international arrivals is not required, and Te Marae Ora is not considering recommending to Cabinet to reinstate this. Should the situation change, these changes will be communicated to the public, and the evidence for our response will guide our recommendations to Cabinet”.

“We continue to learn more about this virus every day. This has been helped by the unprecedented sharing of information across the world. The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 is adept and stealthy. And even though the risk is low there will always be the possibility it will get here and by the time we realise it is here it will have spread if public health measures are not practiced now”.

“So, we must remain vigilant and continue to practise our public health measures. These include hand washing, avoiding touching our face, covering our coughs and sneezes, physical distancing of two metres, avoiding shouting or singing in enclosed and crowded spaces, and regularly disinfecting surfaces”.

“As we have seen in New Zealand and other counties who have been successful at keeping COVID-19 under control, even without community transmission, we must continue to remind the public about the safety measures they can take to protect them and their families and communities. This needs to be everyone’s responsibility”.

“Te Marae Ora is also preparing advice regarding the use of face masks especially when out in public, or in enclosed and crowded spaces. This virus is spread through respiratory droplets, aerosols, and on surfaces, and there is good evidence to recommend the use of face masks”.

“Everyone should ensure they have registered for CookSafe and scan their QR codes when entering participating stores and businesses. Shortly, all schools, churches, community centres and government facilities will have this scanning technology available”.

When the Cook Islands were declared a COVID-19 free zone on 16 April, Government’s strategy was and continues to be, to strengthen efforts on mitigating the public health risk at the border in the Cook Islands and New Zealand. In other words, ‘keep it out’. However, we are understanding as have other countries, that even with the best plans we may not be able to achieve this. So, in the Cook Islands, we must be alert to the possibility of the virus breaching our border and be ready to respond efficiently and effectively.

“Border agencies have been working hard to enhance our border control measures. Protocols and standard operating procedures continue to be updated based on our learnings from every arriving flight and cargo ship. We are training our workforce and testing our processes to identify and address gaps. Importantly, we are including leaders and representatives of our community so that we ensure we have the best advice and plans for our people”.

At present all international arrivals must complete an Arrivals Health Declaration form which seeks information about the travellers movements in the previous 14 days, whether they work at border institutions, any symptoms of COVID-19 and if they have ever tested positive for COVID-19. A similar process is underway for all departures to the Pa Enua using a Departures Health Declaration form. The national surveillance, testing and contact tracing plans are also being reviewed as we await the arrival of our in-country PCR lab which is due shortly.

“There are rapid advancements in vaccine and therapeutics development. Clinical trials are occurring in multiple centres and we are hopeful that we can access some of these tested treatments and vaccines in 2021. In the meantime we must optimise our public health measures in the Cook Islands” Dr Herman concluded.

Prime Minister Mark Brown noted “much work has been undertaken this year by the whole country, and the sequential layering of a range of public health measures is helping mitigate the public health threat to the Cook Islands. However, we cannot do this without the help of our people, te Aronga Mana, Religious Advisory Council, NGOs, my parliamentary colleagues, the Private Sector, youth, Puna, and Pa Enua. We do need our community’s support and we are working hard to ensure our public health messages are reaching everyone in Rarotonga and the Pa Enua. We are all in this together”.

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