



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

Prime Minister's Address to the Nation
25 January 2022

Kia Orana – a short time ago the Prime Minister addressed the nation. What follows are his speech notes. It should be noted that the new health measures override those previously issued.

I hope everyone is safe and well after the wild weather conditions we all faced over the weekend.

While there has been a lot of cleanup to do and in some cases damage to repair, I think we must give thanks to the Almighty for his protection over our country. The tropical depression TD05 could easily have intensified to a fully named cyclone that could have caused significantly more damage and threat to life than it did. Luckily it did not and overall I was very encouraged by how well our infrastructure stood up to what was a significant storm and again very high rainfall.

I turn now to focus on our health infrastructure.

Just as New Zealand is bracing for spread of the highly infectious, but generally milder Omicron variant of COVID-19, so too are we.

Some forecasts in New Zealand suggest 50% of the population could be infected in the next two months.

Te Marae Ora expects up to 50% of our population could be infected too, over a period of three months. However our high vaccination rate, wearing masks, social distancing and good hygiene practices will be our best defence against serious illness and death, with most people infected expected to be able to isolate at home until the infection passes.

Our current strategy intends to minimise the spread of Omicron to keep the pressure off our health system and to protect those who may be more prone to illness associated with the Omicron variant.

Our covid-free status, and our ability to watch how other countries are handling the pandemic, has allowed us to prepare and strengthen our health systems as best we can.

It was told to me that public health is best described as the organised response by society to protect and promote health, and to prevent illness, injury, and disability.

It is a core responsibility of government. And one my government, your government, takes very seriously.

Public health comprises three components. The first is “health protection”, and there are examples of this, such as; mandatory helmet wearing to protect against motorbike accidents or the banning of smoking in public places, or emergency powers that allow pandemic control measures such as crowd restrictions or lockdowns.

“Health promotion” refers to the process by which we, us people, are enabled to improve or control our health, through mask use, hand washing, social distancing, and fist bumping instead of hugging, for instance.

The third component – “disease prevention and early detection” – includes testing, surveillance, screening, and prevention programmes.

Our vaccination program is an example of disease prevention. We should all be incredibly proud of our achievement of being one of the most highly vaccinated populations in the world.

So far, 99.6% of us have had at least the first dose, 97% of us have had the second dose and the booster shot / third dose has been received by 70% of the eligible populations on Rarotonga and Aitutaki.

Reducing the risk of airborne transmission is something we all must take responsibility for. One of the best ways to do this is to wear a mask whenever you are in public.

One of the best masks currently available is the KF94. A mask exactly like this one –

Our government, through Te Marae Ora has been successful in securing a large quantity of these masks. Enough to allow for 5 masks to be given to every resident.

Beginning today on Rarotonga the Puna will be managing the distribution to households, while Tourism Cook Islands will be co-ordinating the distribution of masks to over 400 tourism properties and services. So let’s get used to carrying our masks with us wherever we go.

COVID infections are spread from person to person, most frequently through airborne transmission.

We all need to control our own risk of exposure – wearing a mask does just that.

As more information – scientific information – is known, Te Marae Ora will continue to adjust it's focus. One thing this epidemic has taught the world is the importance of remaining agile and flexible enough to change strategy when the evidence directs you to.

As an epidemic disease, covid will always find the unvaccinated and under vaccinated and will spread rapidly in those groups. This is why it is so important to be vaccinated.

This coming Friday and Saturday the Te Marae Ora vaccination team will again be offering vaccinations to anyone over 12 years on Rarotonga who wants to begin their vaccination process, get their second dose, or get their third/booster shots.

Next week the team will be administering the third/booster shots to our people on Atiu, Mangaia, Mitiaro and Mauke.

Again, and I'm aware there are very few of our people who are unvaccinated in the Pa Enuā, but anyone who has had a change of mind will be welcome to begin their vaccination process.

Vaccination for our 5 – 11-year-olds is expected to begin within the next two weeks.

Contact tracing is another area where we can demonstrate our care for ourselves and those around us.

Contact tracing is important because close contacts are at highest risk of becoming infected next, and if they are not identified, isolated, and quarantined they will go on to infect others and cause exponential epidemic growth.

CookSafe is our best contact tracing program – I urge you all to use it. Omicron transmits is at a higher rate than other known variants. When everyone tags in, we strengthen the speed and increase efficiency in locating potential close contacts and shutting it down. This means we can actively work in reducing the spread.

Cabinet has met twice over the last three days and has approved the implementation of the following extra public health measures proposed by Te Marae Ora.

From midnight tomorrow night;

- face coverings are to be worn in all indoor spaces – the only exceptions to this are our under 6's and schools, where face masks are not mandatory for students but will be allowed;
- a maximum of 100 people can attend any event or gathering
- a maximum of 100 people can be in any bar, nightclub, café, or restaurant at any one time

In addition, we have the following **travel related measures** that will help to protect us all.

- everyone travelling to any of the Pa Enua must be vaccinated (or have a Pa Enua travel exemption)
- everyone travelling to any of the Pa Enua must provide a negative rapid antigen test on the day of departure
- no-one can travel to the Pa Enua (excluding Aitutaki) without first spending 7 continuous days in the Cook Islands

And from 1 February, for a month, no unvaccinated people will be allowed entry into the Cook Islands. The only exception is children under 5 years who are travelling with Cook Islands Residents or Work Permit Holders.

For two years now we have lived in the shadow that COVID-19 has cast over our planet.

Our ocean has been our protection, and our closed borders have kept us covid-free. In the beginning that was the only protection we had.

But it has come at a great price to our livelihoods and our way of life, and we have lost many of our people who've gone away to find work to support themselves and their families. Our biggest industry and source of revenue – tourism - ground to a halt.

Now we have a viable and highly successful vaccine to either prevent us from getting the virus or protecting most of us from serious illness, hospitalisation and death.

By monitoring developments overseas and taking the best medical and scientific advice we've had access to, we have cautiously reopened our country.

More and more these days people are talking about 'living with covid', just as we have grown to live with the common cold and the flu which is still fatal to a few. Some scientists are suggesting that after the whirlwind way the Omicron variant has spread, peaked and then started to die down around the world, covid may be beginning to wane.

I hope they're right, but only time will tell.

In the meantime we must continue to keep our guard up and follow the rules. Those who haven't already done so I urge you to get vaccinated, and I urge parents to get our 5 to 11 year olds vaccinated too when we start their program shortly.

In closing, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you. Thank you to all our frontliners for doing your job, your sacrifice and countless hours serving our people. Kia tatou katoatoa te iti tangata Kuki Airani, te oronga atu nei au, te reo akameitakianga no ta tatou akamaroiroi'anga, ta tatou akakoromaki'anga, to tatou vaerua taokotai e te akamoeau i teia nga mataiti i topa e tae mai ki teia ra. Meitaki maata.

Taku irava kia tatou i teia ra, no roto mai ia losua 1;9 ***“Kare aina au te akaue atuna ia koe? Kia matutu, e kia maroiroi roa, auraka e maku, auraka oki a ngarangara, tei vaitata katoa oki to Atua ko lehova ia koe i to au aerenga katoa ra”***

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go”

We have all been in this together from the start, lets keep that togetherness as we go forward. May God continue to bless our country and our people.

Kia Orana e kia manuia.