

ALL OF GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: SATURDAY, 28 MARCH 2020

John Ombler: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for coming here on a very wet Saturday in Wellington. We're giving Ashley Bloomfield a very well-deserved day off today, so Sarah Stuart-Black will give a health update and then I'll give a more general update, and then we'll take some questions. Can I hand over to you, Norm.

Stuart-Black: Thank you very much. Today, I'm providing the Ministry of Health update on confirmed COVID-19 case numbers. There are 83 new cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand, made up of 78 new confirmed cases and five probable cases. This is at nine o'clock this morning. There are 50 individuals that we can confirm have recovered. We have 12 people in hospital with COVID-19, there are three in Wellington Regional Hospital, two in Nelson Hospital, two in Whangarei Hospital, and one each in Auckland, Waikato, Taranaki, Dunedin, and Greymouth hospitals. There are two people in intensive care units, one on a ventilator, and for privacy reasons I won't be providing other details on these two cases.

As Dr Bloomfield mentioned yesterday, laboratories are working to process and report test results as quickly as possible. Taken over a seven-day period, our average daily test number is 1,613. Anyone who has been tested is expected to be in strict self-isolation until advised of the result of their test. Overseas travel and links to confirmed cases continue to be in the most significant infection path. The combined total of confirmed and probable cases in New Zealand today is 451.

Finally, I'd like to reiterate my messages over the last few days, and ones that Ashley Bloomfield has also reiterated, and you'll have also seen from local health authorities: please be kind to each other. Particularly on social media, we're seeing reports of abuse to people with confirmed COVID-19. There's a high level of anxiety in the community, and it's just not acceptable to be attacking people that have been caught up in the pandemic. We want those with the symptoms of COVID-19 to get tested so we can manage this outbreak and recognise the clusters of transmission and stop them from spreading. Please don't make this any harder for people to be able to seek the help that they need to be identified as having COVID-19.

We need to look out for each other now more than ever, to unite against COVID-19, and as you've heard John say, the weather here is pretty awful, and it probably is in other parts of the country. It's a great day to snuggle up at home and enjoy being with your loved ones in your home, where it's safe to be. Please take care of each other and be kind.

Ombler: Thanks, Norm. So a more general update: this is our first weekend at national alert level 4, and we're very pleased with how people in New Zealand have responded this week. I'd like to thank people for the good stuff that everybody's doing to keep communities safe. These momentous changes were flagged less than a week ago and it's only two days since we've been living a new way of life, and we're very quickly adapting to that, and you all will be in your own ways.

I have an update from the police. They report that most people, in their view, are following the new rules. There've been some isolated incidents of people congregating. In these situations, people were spoken to and provided with advice on what the restrictions mean. We don't want people congregating at parks and beaches. Keep to the two-metre rule; it's really important. Don't go swimming or surfing. A walk along the local beach is fine, but don't do anything that may result in you requiring help if you end up getting into trouble.

If people believe that others are not complying with the restrictions, I suggest the first port of call is to talk politely with them and discuss it. If it's necessary, and people are clearly flaunting the rules that we want, you may wish to call the police on 105. If it's urgent, there's always 111, but let's leave that for real emergencies.

This weekend is very different from usual. It's important for everyone to stay home and save lives, New Zealanders and visitors alike. You might be tempted to leave the house, but you can only leave home for essential reasons and for physical exercise by yourself or with the other people in your house. Stick to your bubble. By all means, go for a short walk or run in your neighbourhood, but don't go to playgrounds or drive to a beach or park outside your neighbourhood. Stay local. Avoid going distances—tramping, fishing, hunting, surfing, swimming, and other activities at a distance from home. Emergency services are needed to respond to the COVID-19 challenge. Please help them by reducing the chance of any other issues.

I've heard today that some people were playing touch rugby and frisbee in parks. That's just stupid. People need to stop doing that sort of thing. COVID can transfer on a frisbee from one person to another. With touch rugby, it's quite obvious: please don't do it; don't be stupid.

Travelling locally means don't travel out of your neighbourhood and go to baches or second homes. Stay in one place. If you're outside your home, keep physical distance from other people; give them two metres of space. And you can only be in physical contact with those in your bubble—those you live with.

Avoid public spaces. Don't touch surfaces others may have touched. Local transport such as buses and trains are available for people who do not have other options for essential travel, including going to the supermarket and the pharmacy. After touching surfaces on public transport, make sure you sanitise your hands. Please remember that domestic travel around New Zealand outside your locality is banned, except for essential business and essential workers. This means you can't drive or fly or take a bus or train out of town.

Just talking about New Zealanders returning home for a moment, we're continuing to bring Kiwis home and have ensured we have the capacity to accommodate those without a self-isolation plan on arrival, and that includes accommodation and food. I've heard about a lack of food for some returning New Zealanders, and that's not good enough, and we're working on it. Hotels are required to feed guests, and we're discussing issues with them, and we are sending the Red Cross to hotels to help with welfare issues as they arise.

We now have the ability to transfer international arrivals to their home base via regional flights specifically for their repatriation home. For those arriving at an international port who are able to get home with no more than five hours' travel by car, they'll be permitted to do so under certain circumstances. Private vehicle—one driver, two or three passengers, keeping in mind the social distancing requirements, making sure people have sufficient space and distance to transport family members home. There's no welcome home hugs—strict self-isolation upon arrival home, and that will be checked. I understand that for a number of people, separation from family will put self-isolation for 14 days—it's a distressing situation, it's an uncomfortable experience, and we're making every effort to make sure people's needs are being met. As you can understand, getting New Zealanders home during a state of emergency in New Zealand and the wider global pandemic has been an exceptionally difficult task, and it's important to recognise that this is a huge effort involving both the public and private sectors.

Just talking briefly about supermarket shopping, no one needs to worry about supermarkets running out of food. The supply chain is working. Try to avoid long lines at the supermarket over the weekend by shopping during the week. Shop for essentials only. Choose one person to do the shopping. If you need one person to drive, leave them in the car until the shopper comes back to the car. Two people and groups should not be allowed in together. Respect the need for physical distancing. If you're in the line or in a grocery aisle, stand two metres away. If someone asks you to allow them more space, please move. Be polite, be kind. Pack your own bags and keep a distance with trollies, and a big thankyou to supermarket and supply chain staff for keeping this essential service going for us. And when you go home from the supermarket, wash your hands thoroughly.

PPE—personal protective equipment: we've had some questions about this. We now have information on the COVID-19 website. I'll just show you an example—there's posters such as this one on the COVID-19 website which provide guidance to people in the health sector and across essential services in the community about what personal protective equipment is needed in their circumstance. I'll just read right across the top, though, because it applies to everybody regardless of what the specific need might be in certain industries—this applies to everybody, and I think it applies to everybody in our community: "Basic hygiene measures for everyone include: physical distancing, good hand hygiene." As we all walked in here today, me and you, we all had hand sanitiser and we cleaned our hands—thank you. Cough etiquette: if you're coughing, into the elbow, don't spread it round. Regular cleaning of surfaces and frequently touched items, avoid touching your face, eyes, mouth, and nose. If everybody does that, we'll be in a much better state.

So the Ministry of Health recommendations vary depending on what people are doing. Many people, including most hotel workers and maintenance people, can stay safe by keeping to those conditions I just read out. Others may need some specific PPE. It's clear on the website for everybody to look at and to follow. We're working to ensure that hotels and motels supporting those New Zealanders returning to New Zealand and requiring a place to isolate have the right information and the right access to PPE equipment for the work that they are doing. Remember, for further details, look at the COVID-19 website.

And a couple of thank-yous: big thanks to all the essential workers, including health workers; the people who are growing, making, and selling food and goods; essential distributors; police; emergency services; transport workers; hotel staff; and others. And it's great to see the measures being put in place to keep people safe as well as keeping the country running. Everyone who's staying home, please support essential service workers by respecting all of our recommendations to protect them and you. We're all in this together. Now let's keep up the great work and break the chain of infection of COVID-19—and if you're ever unsure, make sure to look at that website.

Just finally, I'll reiterate it—you've heard it several times; it's worth reiterating—remember the self-isolation rules. If you're sick, stay home, don't go out; maintain good hygiene with washing hands; sneeze or cough into the elbow; and, while maintaining physical distance, support those who are in need and be kind to one another. And now Norm and I will be happy to take any questions that you may have.

Media: Any details on what city those repatriation flights will be going to?

Ombler: I don't have the exact details, but I'll make sure that—they've been coming in predominantly, I think, over the last few days, to either Auckland, Wellington, or Christchurch. I'm not familiar with the exact forward schedule, but we can get that for you if you like.

Media: Is there any community transmission in Nelson? We hear there might be.

Ombler: Norm, have you got any comment on that?

Stuart-Black: So as Ashley Bloomfield has previously outlined, most cases in New Zealand continue to be linked to overseas travel, but in a limited number of cases, the Ministry of Health has been unable to confirm a definite link to overseas travel or to an existing confirmed case. But I don't have the details of those specific cases around the country.

Media: The first case in Nelson in ICU—are New Zealand hospitals ready now to take more cases? Do we have enough respirators? Are we ready to go now with more people?

Stuart-Black: So I think if I perhaps take that one—

Ombler: Yes, that's fine.

Stuart-Black: I think there's a lot of interest, clearly, in both the supplies of personal protective equipment but also in the hospital facilities themselves, and this is why there's

this continued exploration about all of the different streams of being able to access both products and equipment to make sure that we maintain what we need here in New Zealand. But right now, the hospitals have been ramping up, obviously, over the recent weeks to be able to cope with any patients needing that kind of respiratory support, including in intensive care beds. So we're continuing the ongoing effort to purchase and make sure that those products are being provided to New Zealand.

Media: Have you got any information about Air New Zealand staff or employees that have been infected with COVID-19?

Stuart-Black: So I understand that there is a small number of Air New Zealand staff that have tested positive for COVID-19 and that Air New Zealand has been in touch with their people. Air New Zealand will be making a public statement this afternoon on this issue.

Media: Air New Zealand has said that it's told its staff if they have no symptoms, they're no risk to others. Is that your advice as well?

Stuart-Black: Can you read that again?

Media: So Air New Zealand has told its workforce that while they have no symptoms, they are no risk to others. Do you agree with that advice that's been given?

Stuart-Black: So I think that Ashley's been really clear about the fact that people need to proactively be careful, be precautionary, about the approach. So whilst I understand that Air New Zealand has an enormous workforce, I think one of the issues we'll need to obviously really be promoting right across all industries and all organisations is the need to be precautionary here. So our baseline advice is: if in doubt, self-isolate; that's the easiest thing to do. But we'll be awaiting to see what Air New Zealand says this afternoon.

Media: The problem that was highlighted earlier this week around contact tracing not being able to be done remotely, has that been fixed yet?

Stuart-Black: So I understand that there is, of course, continued outbound contact tracing, and, in fact, there is additional resources being brought in to make sure that that can continue to be ramped up. So as far as I'm informed, I understand that's continuing to be increased as the need and the demand increases.

Media: How critical are the cases in the intensive care units?

Stuart-Black: My understanding would be if they're in intensive care, then they're critically unwell.

Media: With the roll-out of the flu vaccine, it seems to have been rolled back. Is that going to put more pressure on hospitals—at the same time as people are in ICU, more elderly people could be getting sick and being brought into hospital for flu symptoms?

Stuart-Black: Sure. So the start of the vaccination programme for influenza has been brought forward this year to prioritise vaccination for those at-risk groups but also health professionals and those over 65. This year's flu vaccine campaign will be the biggest that's ever been provided in New Zealand: 400,000 more vaccines available in 2020 compared with last year. The Ministry of Health and Pharmac have been working with the distributor to make sure that influenza vaccines reach the people who need them most, and that they've reprioritised orders so that every vaccination provider has at least received their first order.

Media: Can you just clarify again, sorry—just missed it—do you believe Nelson has enough ventilators? A hospital like—

Stuart-Black: I don't have the specific information about that, but we can refer that back to the Ministry of Health.

Media: Are you able to confirm whether COVID-19—how many cases are Māori/Pacific?

Stuart-Black: I don't have that information, but I can refer that back to the Ministry of Health.

Media: Beneficiaries too?

Stuart-Black: We'll be able to find that out. Thank you.

Media: Just in terms of the two in ICU, can you just clarify where they are?

Stuart-Black: I don't have the information of which hospitals. I have that there are two people in intensive care units, one on a ventilator, and for privacy reasons, I don't have that information here.

Media: I've got some questions around flouting the self-isolation rules: so there have been reports to Stuff around dozens of businesses in Canterbury self-declaring themselves essential, and people are asking is there any way they can report them. And we've also seen people surfing in Taranaki, and police are dropping little notes on their car, but is that good enough? Should more be done? Can people report them?

Ombler: Well, as I said before, the first thing I think is that as a community, supporting one another—and part of that support may be having a word to say, “Do you realise that what you are doing isn't in compliance with the self-isolation rules?” If people don't respond to that and there's clearly ongoing flouting of the rules, then the suggestion is that people should ring police on 105. But in the first instance, let's just gather together as a community and try to get what we're after. It is vitally important that people across the country follow these rules. We cannot allow person-to-person spread of this disease. It must stop.

Media: There's reports coming out of the UK that not all PPE given to staff meets the World Health Organization standards. What guarantees do we have here that all of that PPE going to health workers do meet the World Health Organization standards?

Stuart-Black: Look, whilst on the specifics of that, I think that's a response back to the Ministry of Health. I think they have worked with the evidence base to inform their purchase of equipment that is going to be right for this pandemic. And so I think that that's really about making sure that that they're trying to do their very best to provide that protection for the people that we need the most through this. They're going to need be fronting the patients that are most critically unwell, so all of the equipment that is being brought in to New Zealand is to make sure that we're at that higher standard of protection.

Media: Just on the gatherings and social distancing, do you know if there's been any arrests or formal warnings issued yet?

Ombler: I know the police have had discussions with a number of people, but I have no knowledge of it proceeding to arrests at this point.

Media: Just going back to Air New Zealand, do we know how or where the staff got COVID-19?

Stuart-Black: I don't have that information.

Media: What happens to businesses who've secured the 12-week worker subsidy if we go back to work after six weeks? Does that amount already in the bank account have to be paid back to the Government? How does that work?

Ombler: That's a question that I don't have the absolute answer to here, so I won't try to answer it, but we can make sure that that sort of question is part of the Q and As on our website.

Media: *[Inaudible]* update, is there anything about any more clusters at all, or anything around clusters?

Stuart-Black: So as Dr Ashley Bloomfield has noted previously, there are a few clusters—five that we know of—in New Zealand, and this includes the cases involving Marist College in Auckland, the World Hereford Conference in Queenstown, the *Ruby Princess* cruise ship, a wedding in Wellington, and people that returned from a trip to New York.

Media: Just on emergency services, so emergency services workers, when they go out to respond to incidents, in terms of this COVID lockdown, does that change the way they approach situations like that at all?

Stuart-Black: Well, I think the poster that John showed just before is around trying to provide really clear guidance to the range of people that might need to use personal protective equipment, including our front line, and they've received advice from their organisations about how they might need to operate differently in certain situations where they're going into the community.

Media: [*Inaudible*] on that advice, at all?

Stuart-Black: I think probably look at the poster that's available in terms of that provides quite a lot of information. But we'll be able to provide some updated information from the emergency services, maybe at a following media stand-up.

Media: The number of new cases today isn't as big of an increase as other days. Would you say that it's plateauing now, or have we still got some time for the disease to run before we see that peak?

Stuart-Black: So from what Dr Ashley Bloomfield said yesterday, we will expect to see an increase in cases over the coming days, and I think, from memory, yesterday he said up to 10 days, where that will give us an idea of how successful we have been. But that's going to rely on all of us really sticking so clearly to those self-isolation rules. It's the game-changer, so if we're all able to follow those, actually we will start to see an impact on the numbers, but that's going to be over days and days of continued efforts for all of us.

Media: On the Kiwis who've returned from overseas who are now self-isolated in a hotel or motels, once their two weeks are over, do they have to stay in that hotel until the end of the lockdown, or how would they—with domestic travel ruled out, how would they get home to their places, or do they stay?

Ombler: The intention is that for those people you're describing, who have been straight into quarantine in a hotel on arriving in New Zealand, that after they've been there for 14 days, we would help them return to their home in New Zealand, where they would remain in self isolation, the same as all the rest of us, until the expiry of that period.

Media: But if there's no public transport and Air New Zealand flights are barely going—say they live down south and they're currently in Auckland—how would that happen?

Ombler: We will make sure that it can happen.

Media: Are there any members of Cabinet or MPs that are currently receiving or have been tested for COVID-19?

Stuart-Black: I have no information on that.

Media: Has community transmission been ruled out for all of those new cases?

Stuart-Black: Sorry, can you—?

Media: Has community transmission been ruled out for all of those new cases?

Stuart-Black: I don't have any information on that, thank you.

Media: Do you have any more update—so the man in his 70s in Nelson, the ICU patient, is there any more information about how he's doing?

Stuart-Black: I've received no further update today from the situation that Dr Ashley Bloomfield talked to yesterday.

Media: Yesterday, it said that there was a second person not in a stable condition, but they were still in the ward. Are they the second ICU patient?

Stuart-Black: I don't know that. All I know is that there are two patients in ICU.

Media: For front-line health workers in hospitals, a lot of them are trying to self-isolate from their families by staying in hotels and motels. Are they paying for their own accommodation or is the Government helping them?

Stuart-Black: I don't have information on that, but we'll find that out.

Media: Whanganui company QSI, that manufactures protective masks, has an alert on their website saying they're running out and they're trying to source additional stock. Is QSI the same company that's making these masks that the Prime Minister says is manufacturing thousands of them, do you know?

Stuart-Black: I don't know if that is the same company or not. We'll see if we can get an answer for you on that one.

Media: Just to go back to the question around community transmission in Nelson, do you guys have any particular fears about community transmission down there given, I guess, the population down there, the elderly population down there, at all?

Stuart-Black: I think we have fears about community transmission right across the country. So this is about making sure that as we're progressing day on day, that we're taking every opportunity to stay self-isolated and be able to provide support to those that are most at risk in our communities.

Media: What is the message at the moment for people who've come into close contact with those two ICU patients?

Stuart-Black: I think, like any case, I think it would be to seek medical advice, and particularly if you've had symptoms, but I think if you're concerned, please seek medical advice. But self-isolate as a proactive and precautionary approach is the best advice in this situation.

Media: What is the policy for hospital protocol at the moment, particularly in maternity wards, where fathers are being told they aren't allowed into the areas?

Stuart-Black: Look, I haven't heard reports of that, but I know that within the Ministry of Health, they're working really hard to provide guidance to all elements of the health community. Of course, there's particular concerns around wanting to minimise risk to a whole lot of at-risk groups, including those that may be about to have babies. But I don't have specific information on that situation.

Media: This morning, the Prime Minister spoke about testing, and she spoke about three new areas where they were hoping to get that set up. Can you tell us where that will be and how soon that might be?

Stuart-Black: I don't have specific information about that. I'll just take one more. One more? You're all done? Thank you very much.

conclusion of press conference