

PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 31 MARCH

PM: Kia ora, good afternoon, and welcome. I apologise that today there was some disruption to the usual routine of press conferences that everyone is becoming familiar with. The select committee process this morning meant that we had to make a slight adjustment to the director-general's update, but we will try to avoid, as much as we can, disruption to the schedule that people are becoming used to.

Before I start, I do want to acknowledge that I do not underestimate the difficulty of the challenge of being in alert level 4—for families, for those living on their own, for anyone in New Zealand right now. While we are doing all we can to stop the spread of the virus, we are also aware of our need to do all we can to make the experience of those at home the best it can be.

As some of you will have heard, there has been a very welcome announcement—made last night—that affects, actually, Kiwis that live offshore: New Zealand workers in Australia will be eligible for Australia's wage subsidy scheme. This is likely to help significant numbers of New Zealanders, and I'm pleased to see this recognition that New Zealanders in Australia make a really important contribution to the Australian economy. I've spoken to Prime Minister Morrison several times to make the case for helping New Zealanders in Australia, including people in work, but also those who lose their job to COVID-19—most recently, a conversation yesterday morning. The Deputy Prime Minister had also spoken to his Australian foreign affairs counterpart on this matter, and the team at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has been doing an excellent job of raising the issue also within the Australian system.

I should add that we have done the same in terms of support for Australians here in New Zealand. New Zealand is supporting Australians who work and pay tax here by giving them access to our wage subsidy package. Australians are also eligible for social welfare in New Zealand, after they have lived here for two years. Ideally, we would like to still see that full access available in Australia, but in the meantime, we are incredibly pleased to see an exception has been made for the wage subsidy.

Closer to home, the Government's COVID-19 committee met today, so I can update you on several decisions that Ministers have made. First, the state of national emergency put in place to help stop the spread of COVID-19 has been extended for a further seven days. The initial declaration on 25 March lasted seven days and can be extended as many times as necessary. Extension ensures the continuity of the resources, support, and powers needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. This includes ensuring our Civil Defence Emergency Management workers can carry out critical work, including managing roads, traffic, and public places; issuing first aid; and the provision of food, shelter, and accommodation.

The committee also had further discussions about Easter trading. Ministers agreed that supermarkets will be closed as usual on Good Friday but will be able to open on Easter Sunday. Making this decision, we considered input from supermarkets, from unions who represent the workforce of those supermarkets, and communities. It's fair to say that there were a range of views amongst Ministers, and I do want to acknowledge the religious significance of Easter Sunday for many New Zealanders.

Our decision was driven by the desire to strike a balance between the need for the workforce in our supermarkets to get a well-earned break and for supermarkets to restock, which has been an issue for many, catching up on what was unprecedented demand in our supermarkets across the country. But we also balanced that against the need of people to access supermarkets at this unprecedented time. In the end, the important issue for us was that we wanted to avoid people rushing to the supermarket if there were two days of closure, which would defeat the work everyone is doing to try and reduce people's contact

with one another. Given supermarkets are often closed on Easter Sunday, it is important that employees know they still have the right to refuse to work that day. I'm sure that employers will act fairly with these requests, and I have been told that the supermarkets have already advised us that employees will be able to volunteer to work on that day, rather than being rostered on.

I encourage everyone, though, at this time to consider the strain on supermarkets at present, and to only shop for what you need, as usual, while ensuring, of course, you keep that physical distancing while you shop. And if I could make one more request, please be kind to the people who work there. They are doing an incredible service to us at present and they deserve nothing but our respect at this time.

I was asked yesterday about the status of media as an essential service, and this was also discussed by COVID Ministers today. As you can see, we have treated media as an essential service, but several media publications have expressed concern over which forms of media production and distribution meet the criteria of essential services. While the help of the New Zealand public in stopping the spread of COVID-19 is our top priority, New Zealanders must also have ongoing access to independent media voices for news and current affairs, as well as for sharing public health messages.

With that in mind, Ministers have agreed to expand the essential business guidance for media to include targeted production of printed newspapers for communities that are hard to reach. It is important to note that our priority remains to stop the movement of people unnecessarily. It is a decision that a very limited number of publications which can demonstrate they fill an unmet need, and can also show they have appropriate health and safety measures in place to minimise the transmission of COVID-19 during production and delivery, will be approved as essential. This means an expectation that delivery will be, for instance, through existing mechanisms like New Zealand Post, at supermarkets, or at local dairies. Now, keeping in mind this decision really relates to some of those smaller, rural, isolated community newspapers, for example. Other printed periodical and non-daily publications, including magazines, will continue to remain non-essential under the news and media designation, although I do note that many of them have an online offering.

There have been accusations that any restrictions on publications breaches the rights of freedom of speech. That is, of course, not our view, nor is it our objective. Now more than ever, it's important that people have as much information and access to news as is possible, but it's also about reducing the risks of exposure to COVID-19. Where people can provide their community media content online, we ask them to focus on that mode of publication during this heightened alert, but we accept that there are remote communities and, for instance, non-English language communities who may not be accessing information through other means. I do acknowledge that the media will be significantly affected by the financial impact of COVID-19 as well, and we continue to work with all businesses to help cushion the blow and to protect the jobs of New Zealanders.

Today, you will have heard from the director-general that the distribution of PPE continues. This morning, I was advised that more than 7 million face masks have been dispatched to the North and South Island with the intent that these will go to our front-line community health workers: our midwives, support workers both for disability and aged care, our family planning workers, and so on. This, I know, will come as a welcome update and is part of the ongoing distribution of support to those on the front line.

And finally, I want to finish with a word on our cases for today. We now have a total of 647 confirmed and probable cases. The number of confirmed cases overnight was 58, and that was after 1,391 tests. In total, to answer a question asked yesterday, 21,384 tests have been conducted, and we have currently the capacity to process roughly 3,500 tests per day. I had a discussion with our Director-General of Health today, as I do every day when we receive our test results. We both agree, not only is it too soon to draw conclusions on New Zealand's position as we tackle this global pandemic; we also don't yet believe we have

enough testing to tell us what we need to know. The more we test, the more it tells us how far our community transmission is, and it tells us where it is.

Today, the technical advisory group met. Now, this is the group that has been helping to set the criteria for the Ministry of Health on who is tested. Today, that group have recommended broadening the case definition for testing. This will widen testing to include people with COVID-19 symptoms but not necessarily a history of travel or exposure to another case to be tested. This case definition will be sent out to Healthline, general practice, and to the community clinics where testing is taking place. Now, while it may take a few days for these changes to have an effect, I do expect the number of people tested in New Zealand to grow, and it needs to grow.

So that should bring everyone up to speed with the latest information, but before I take your questions, I want to share one last thing. I've received a lot of correspondence from the relatives of pharmacists, reminding me and all of us of the front-line role their family members are playing as we fight to stop the spread of COVID-19 and to keep our communities well. And so we thank our 1,072 community pharmacies spread across New Zealand for continuing to provide such an essential service at this time, especially as they also support our medical and nursing workforce in the early flu vaccination campaign for our most vulnerable New Zealanders, and also for adapting to alert level 4 requirements and providing virtual services for working on split shifts to observe physical distancing. From all of us, we say thank you.

Now I am happy to take questions.

Media: Prime Minister, is it time to get a bit tougher on people arriving at the airports who are sent home to self-isolate given that they're such a high-risk group? We heard from John Ombler today that the police aren't checking everyone; they're checking samples. So is that tough enough, that regime?

PM: And the numbers that they are checking are large, but I would like to only see that continue. What we have seen, though, from those checks they're undertaking is that by and large there is compliance, but it is critical, and I say again to those New Zealanders: you are some of our most at-risk individuals in terms of likelihood of having COVID-19. That is why we are triaging those travellers in groups, interviewing every single one, checking their self-isolation plans, and if it is not adequate, they are being placed in accommodation.

Media: Is an element of trust being relied on, though, because people are, you know, as you said, in that high-risk group being sent home. There are police checks, but is it time to move to where Australia is, for example, where the trust is taken out of it—or options are taken out?

PM: I would say to anyone who is, after an interview, established that they have their own self-isolation plan—if they are found to not be complying with that, they risk a fine and they also risk being quarantined in a Government facility. And so this is not just a situation where we are relying on people; we will enforce it, and we will enforce it strictly.

Media: On those tests, Prime Minister, how concerned are you that we haven't been testing enough, and what will the flow-on effect of that be?

PM: I'm not willing, at this stage, to draw any conclusions from our numbers, because we do need to test more New Zealanders. That will give us a much better sense of where and how large our community transmission is, and so whilst we've been continuing to ramp up, and our capacity for testing is good, we simply aren't testing enough yet. So we will continue broadening that criteria; testing more New Zealanders is key.

Media: [*Inaudible*] 3,500 tests being done every day?

PM: I want more tests; we've built the capacity for more tests. More tests will only help us get a better picture of the spread of COVID-19 in New Zealand. I'm not complacent here; I don't sit on my laurels with any of the numbers we get. My belief is we need to know more, and my hope is we'll continue to get more information, not less.

Media: Why haven't we been testing enough, and why didn't we loosen that criteria sooner?

PM: Well, we've had the capacity to test. We've also always had the discretion for doctors around testing, but now we're sending a very clear message has come through from those who have been working up those guidance for clinicians: test, test, test.

Media: [*Inaudible*] why didn't you do that four weeks ago?

PM: Again, ultimately, clinicians make these decisions, not politicians, and the discretion has always been there. But I have continually sent a message and will keep doing so: test, test, test.

Media: Do you know if there's been any re-testing of people who have—

PM: I'd have to ask that question—I do know there has been, at least in even our first COVID-19 case, where it was seen as so likely there was more than one test conducted. There has been international evidence to suggest it is possible to get false negatives, and so I know that there have been examples of re-testing. But you'll also see we're also willing to declare a case probable, even if a test comes back as a negative.

Media: Could you talk a bit about the nine new clusters that have been identified? Would they be expected, or are they of particular cause for concern?

PM: Well, I think you'll also have the director-general giving some of the proportions of how many are considered to be community transmission. That's where we really have concern. It's where we can't trace. A number of our clusters, while they're growing, we can all trace to where they came from, and that tells us whether or not we've got a good handle of where COVID is in our community, and how it came to be there.

Media: And you'd be hoping to get a better idea of community transmission rates through that increase as well?

PM: The more we test, yes. And that, ultimately, is why that testing is so important. It tells us how much community transmission we have, where it is, and that will be really important intelligence as we build our plan for what it looks like post - alert level 4 for New Zealand.

Media: Dr Bloomfield has said today that we've moved into eradication, not just flattening the curve. If that fails, what's our plan B?

PM: Oh, well, actually, the alert levels, and the system that we have now, it is all about managing outbreaks and clusters of outbreaks of COVID-19. And so that's why we've established this system. Our hope, of course, is once we get a much better sense of COVID-19 in our community, that we'll be able to move, at least for regions, into lower alert levels, giving people back more freedoms, but also manage outbreaks as they come.

Media: Prime Minister, just another question on the communities, on media services, can you just give a bit more information on that—what sort of newspapers or online media will be able to—

PM: So we've targeted, here, communities that may struggle to otherwise access information—so those who are rural, isolated, or English is second language. Those are just some examples of where we have identified that there are gaps in the provision of information. And what we ask of those news services is that when they're producing their publications, that they can demonstrate that they'll be applying the same public health measures that every New Zealander is in the way that they're working, but also in their distribution. We don't want young people distributing newspapers into communities the way they usually might, but instead using New Zealand Post rural delivery and also using dairies and supermarkets.

Media: And you've reversed that newspapers who normally did every couple of days or whatever could be published?

PM: That will have that effect for those who can meet that criteria, yes.

Media: On media, a number of major media companies here are operating right on the line of viability, and internationally we've seen advertising go to the wall, threatening livelihoods, but, of course, media's definitely important. So are you in conversations with major media companies at the moment to offer support, or are you—

PM: One thing I'd say, for instance, is the wage subsidy is available to those companies in the way it's available to others, and we absolutely recognise the critical role that media is playing in our current situation in New Zealand. It's one of the reasons it was declared as an essential service right from the beginning. But what we've had to put clear lines to define around what is essential and what is not has been more of those less regular publications, but keeping in mind that we do still see information sharing as critical.

Media: So are you in conversation with those media companies, and are you of a mind to support them, you know, in a greater sense?

PM: Not me personally, but as I've said, the wage subsidy is available, and, of course, our Minister Kris Faafoi, I imagine, will be in contact in the same way he has prior to this point in time.

Media: Where are things at in terms of helping big businesses who won't feel much of an impact from the wage subsidy?

PM: Well, actually, I'm not sure I would say that that would necessarily be true. There's no cap on the wage subsidy, so they feel the effect on a per-employee basis in the same way that anyone does. To give you an update, the latest numbers, as of this morning, \$4.1 billion has been paid out; it's affected 642,000 workers. Of those, 104,170 are self-employed. So many will be multiple employees within a large business, and I do encourage them to use the wage subsidy, as I have anyone else.

Media: Prime Minister, just in regards to tourists, the issue around driving cars and camper vans around not staying in the same place, has any consideration been given to asking rental companies to cease to be giving out cars and vehicles and things, because as far I can see, they're still operating?

PM: Yes, and I'm making an assumption here that some of those services we'll be using to assist people to get, in isolation, to their self-isolation plan. But after your line of questioning yesterday around accessing accommodation, for instance, we have got a team who are working on temporary accommodation. They're identifying where accommodation is available, how many units are available, both within motels, hotels, and also with camper vans. My understanding is they're connected to our local civil defence networks, because some of those have been used where people are in crisis situation to provide units and accommodation, whether or not that's someone who's local or someone who may be a tourist.

Media: Prime Minister, it's been two weeks now since the WHO urged all countries to test, test, test. Is it really acceptable that it's taken your Government a fortnight for that message to get through?

PM: I do—again, I would push back there. Our testing, relative to others, is still significant and high. But I have very high expectations of what we will be able to achieve here in New Zealand, and what we need to achieve, not only for the health of New Zealanders but, actually, the long-term health of our economy. The earlier that we get an absolute insight into what's happening in our different communities and regions, the more that that will help us make decisions as we exit level 4. And so that's why I put us in a very specific case here. We have the ability to do it, and I want us to do it. The WHO, I don't think, if they were looking at New Zealand's capacity and testing and the number we've tested, would've been angling that message at us.

Media: Re Australia's "job keeper" scheme, are you looking at beefing up ours given theirs runs for so much longer and gives out so much more money?

PM: Yeah, there are some differences between the schemes. One I think that's really critical—you've just heard me say that we've already had 642,000 workers supported by the wage subsidy scheme today. Australia's scheme, I understand, is paying out in May. Now, that immediacy was one of the things that was so critical for our scheme. Cash flow right now for our businesses and our economy is key, and we delivered that by moving very, very quickly. So that's the first important difference. Second important difference is that we've been paying out in bulk. So that gives employers the flexibility in how they're working that scheme to fit their needs and to meet the needs of their employees. We've also said that we will constantly keep under review the needs of our business community and our workforce, and we're committed to still doing that.

Media: Do you think you will need to extend it past the 12 weeks—

PM: While we haven't made any decisions there, we've always been open to the fact that because we moved very quickly, very early to get money into people's back pockets, we also recognise that would mean we'd need to keep reviewing our settings as well.

Media: [*Inaudible*] hearing about some early childhood education centres who are still charging parents full fees over the four-week lockdown. Do you think that's fair?

PM: Of course, some of those fees will be heavily subsidised by the Ministry of Education as well, and those are continuing, as I understand, in order to keep those businesses afloat. I'm assuming, of course, the assumption was made that they wouldn't be asking parents to top up those. That's something I wouldn't mind putting to our Minister of Education, though, to see what he's been hearing and what his expectations are.

Media: British media have been reporting that New Zealand has rebuffed efforts by Britain to help repatriate 6,000 of its citizens. Laura Clarke says New Zealand has put on pause on repatriation. Is there anything New Zealand is doing to stop other countries repatriating like you—

PM: Happy to clarify. So, actually, the Deputy Prime Minister spoke with his counterpart, foreign secretary, I understand, today in the UK, and our message is clear: we absolutely understand the desire to repatriate those who are here in New Zealand, be they citizens from the UK or Germany. What we're working through right now is a plan that enables us to do that whilst not affecting negatively other New Zealanders who are in lockdown, who are in alert level 4 for their own public health. So—

Media: [*Inaudible*] repatriation flights?

PM: Simply a logistical issue of making sure that where we have people scattered through the country, that we're able to get them to the airport they need to be whilst we're in lockdown. So we're just taking a couple of days to work through the logistics, make sure it's as seamless as possible and as smooth as possible. From what I understand, people are absolutely understanding of the position we're in. We want to look after their foreign nationals, but we also want to look after New Zealanders, who may be needed to assist to get them out.

Media: So on the modelling, how seriously do people need to take those worst-case scenarios?

PM: Well, I think you'll have seen for yourself that on the one hand, we have worst-case scenarios with tens of thousands of New Zealanders losing their lives to COVID-19, and even some of the best-case scenarios paint a very grim picture. That information will show you the stark choice that we as a Government were faced with and that, I believe, we made a choice that was in the best interests of everyone, and it was to save lives.

Media: So we're not out of the woods yet?

PM: No, no, we're not.

Media: Just on Whānau Ora, it's been a week since the announcement around that funding. Is it your understanding that commissioning agencies have actually started rolling out packages for whānau yet?

PM: It was my understanding that they were already in the process of delivering care packages some time ago, but I'm happy to get an update for you.

Media: Prime Minister, just on New Zealanders living in Australia, obviously you're pleased with last night's announcement. Are you going to continue to advocate for Kiwis in Australia to be eligible for welfare payments, and is this an issue that you will continue to raise in your conversations with Prime Minister Morrison?

PM: Oh, look, I'll always be consistent, and you'll see today I've just acknowledged that, actually, in New Zealand, Australians are able to access that kind of support, and all we've ever asked for is that same treatment for Kiwis in Australia. But right now, I do want to acknowledge that a considerable exception has been made to allow New Zealanders to access what they've called their "job keeper" support. I don't underestimate how important that will be for a number of New Zealanders, and we're very, very pleased to see it on offer.

Media: Prime Minister, are you able to shed some light on money going to Women's Refuge, and when we can expect more of that?

PM: Yes, so we've also been working alongside Women's Refuge around the accommodation that they're able to provide, and so whilst we approved that \$27 million last week for a range of different support services, be they food banks or Women's Refuge, it's also about what we can do to provide accommodation. So the Ministry for Housing and Urban Development have been out doing those searches for additional units, and I expect them to be made available for those social services as well. But I can ask our Minister for the latest update on those services, and I can get more information to you.

Media: With all of the growing concern about community transmission, have you considered implementing a curfew or upping the measures that we need to take?

PM: I think, at the moment, New Zealanders would all agree that we are in a pretty stringent environment as it is, and I expect that that will make a big difference. And so being in this situation now means, for instance, when we discover a cluster in, for instance, a rural community, as we have, the fact we're already all in self-isolation means the chances of that having blown out even further has been stopped. And so even when we're discovering those clusters, we're already in the best position possible to manage those and stop those becoming exponential.

Media: One more on testing, sorry: we're aware of multiple cases of GPs referring people to get tests, as you've asked them to do, but then for the patients to be denied—

PM: And at the community clinics not? Yes, I have heard that as well. My expectation, with the clarity that is being provided here around case definition that's coming out of the Ministry of Health, that we should see much greater consistency. As you've—

Media: [*Inaudible*] two weeks ago, perhaps?

PM: Again, as I say, these are decisions made by clinicians, who have always had the discretion to deal with the people that are sitting in front of them at that time. It's never been for politicians, but I will keep encouraging that we test, test, test. This is how we will see what's happening within our communities and feel confident in all the decisions we make going forward.

Media: How are you going to double the number of tests being done to get it to capacity? Are you likely to test at random? Are you likely to do other things?

- PM:** Yeah, good question to ask, because you will have heard the director-general talking about sentinel testing. Alert level 4 doesn't really allow for that regime to work in the same way, but with the case definition changing, with really talking about the symptoms of COVID-19—so, really, upper respiratory tract infections—I think it's much more likely we will start to get that real cross-section of testing across different regions that usually we have through sentinel testing. The other useful tracker we have is FluTracker, and again, I just encourage people. It's a way for us to get an insight into our local communities without people necessarily having to visit their GP clinic. I'll just take a few more questions.
- Media:** There's still some confusion around how far people can go to exercise outside their homes. Can you please just clarify for the people at home again: how far can they go?
- PM:** Happy to. As we've always said, stay local. And, by and large, you know, our preference, of course, would be people just stepping outside of their home and making the most of their local community. I accept, though, there are some people who not near an area where they can safely walk or they can safely get fresh air, so we do accept that people will make short-distance journeys, particularly to get to the supermarket, to the dairy, to the pharmacy, for instance, but keep it as local as possible. Again, I just ask people to think about the risk. And it's not a hypothetical—we have seen cases—if you have an accident, if you have a breakdown, if anything like that happens, it exposes the people around you.
- Media:** Have you got a specific, like, don't go beyond—because overseas they've got you can't go a K beyond your house, or something like that.
- PM:** Yeah, and, actually, we've gone with the common-sense approach of allowing New Zealanders to use their judgment, but always the principle: act like you've got COVID-19.
- Media:** Prime Minister, did the committee discuss any of the supplies to supermarkets, like halal butchers, for example?
- PM:** That is something that we have had a discussion around. We've asked a number of questions around that issue, and we're just waiting for officials to come back with a bit more clarity. So I expect a decision, a final decision, on that very shortly. Keeping in mind, though, what we're very mindful of is the provision—the existing availability of halal products in our supermarkets already.
- Media:** So the people who need it, who are perhaps waiting for it, the message is that it will be available soon?
- PM:** Well, my understanding, actually, is that already there are halal-certified products that already are available in our supermarkets. There are some who choose, because of various practices and issues, choose not to shop at supermarkets, and that perhaps is more the barrier than actually the halal-certified product itself. OK, thanks everyone.

end of press conference