

PRESS CONFERENCE: SATURDAY, 15 AUGUST 2020

Hon Chris Hipkins: Kia ora, everybody. Good afternoon. Today, the director-general will provide the most up-to-date information on the cases and talk about contact tracing. I'll then follow up with an update on how the Government's plan is progressing since the Prime Minister's announcement of a continuation of the present alert level settings last night, and then we will go to questions. Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, Minister. Kia ora koutou katoa. So there are seven new confirmed cases of COVID-19 to report, and they're all in the community. There are no new cases to report from managed isolation. Six of the new cases are already linked to previous cases in this cluster that we have in the community, and one of the new cases remains under investigation. This is in addition to the one case from yesterday where the link to the extant outbreak is still being investigated to firmly establish what that link is. But in both cases, we feel quite confident that they will be linked to the outbreak. Details of all the new cases will go up on the ministry's website.

So to date, 54 people linked to the cluster have been moved into a quarantine facility, including 24 of the people who have tested positive. The seven new cases reported today bring our total number of confirmed cases to 1,258, and we will report that to the World Health Organization. Our number of active cases in New Zealand is 56, of which 37 are from the community outbreak and 19 are imported cases in quarantine. As I said earlier, of the 37 cases in total, which is the total number of cases in our community outbreak, 35 have already been clearly linked to the cluster, and the other two remain under investigation but are strongly believed to be linked to the cluster.

Now, our national contact tracing service has 1,090 close contacts identified, and 934 of those have been contacted by 10 a.m. this morning. Those people are all in self-isolation and will be tested should that be indicated. We are in the process of contacting the remaining close contacts. And a plea to anyone who is associated with or may be a close contact: please take or return the call. Now, you're aware the key measure of effectiveness of our contact tracing is that 80 percent of close contacts are contacted within 48 hours of a positive test result being achieved, and the most complete data we have for the period of 6 August until 12 August is 86 percent of close contacts had been contacted within that 48-hour period.

On to Tokoroa. The two people who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Tokoroa are being transferred to the Auckland quarantine facility, and their whānau and close contacts are in self-isolation, with oversight from the local medical officer of health and support from the local community and iwi. Of their close contacts, all have returned negative tests.

An update on the Morrinsville aged residential care facility. The test results from that Kingswood Rest Home in Morrinsville—all staff and residents at the facility have been tested. All have returned negative results for COVID-19. However, they and the close contacts in Tokoroa and elsewhere do continue to do that 14 days of isolation as an additional measure. Two of the staff there do remain in self-isolation as a precautionary measure, away from the Kingswood Rest Home. I would like to thank the rest home for their fantastic assistance and rapid response.

Masks are now available out in the community. Three million of the 5 million masks were to be made available to community groups and social groups, and 1.6 million were dispatched across 125 groups, and further orders for 400,000 masks were received yesterday from other community organisations, and those will be on the way.

A word on travel exemptions. As Auckland is now continuing in alert level 3 and the rest of country at alert level 2, there are restrictions, obviously, on people entering and leaving the Auckland metro region. These restrictions are, of course, designed to protect the health of people both inside and outside Auckland. So with that Auckland border essentially being

closed, there is a need for an exemptions process. We now have that in place. We have received over a hundred requests for exemptions. All have been acknowledged, and, to date, 45 have been processed and approved, to date. Details about that process and how to apply for an exemption are available on the Ministry of Health website.

There are two investigations under way of international travellers: one who turned up in Japan, or travelled to Japan, and tested positive on arrival, and one who travelled to Belgium and tested positive on arrival. We're doing our best to work with both those individuals and the national focal points in those two countries. One is the Japanese traveller who left New Zealand on 8 August and transited through Singapore to Japan. The other is someone who travelled to Belgium on 6 August and transited also through Singapore via Amsterdam. Both were asymptomatic in New Zealand.

Both cases are considered low risk, and, to date, there is no evidence of any transmission or that they were infectious in New Zealand. However, of course, as part of being very proactive and precautionary, we are undertaking some active contact tracing and testing of any close contacts. All the results of any testing so far have been negative. Eleven of 13 close contacts of the Japanese case have so far been contacted and are in self-isolation with testing under way or completed. Likewise, there was just one close contact of the person who has travelled to Belgium, who is in self-isolation and is well, and further investigation and contact tracing are under way.

In conclusion, I just want to reiterate my comment once again that COVID-19 virus is the problem here, not the people who have it. People, indeed, are the solution. I want to thank everyone who has come forward to be tested and those who have responded rapidly to our contact tracing and testing efforts. We are hearing reports, unfortunately, of some online bullying and nasty comments directed towards people who have contracted COVID-19, and to say that's a pity is an understatement. There is no shame or blame in having either this virus or any other infectious disease. People who we know have tested positive for COVID-19 are to be commended. They have done their bit to protect the team of 5 million, and their quick action in coming forward to be tested and then going into isolation is, indeed, to be encouraged and commended. Thanks, Minister.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Thank you, Dr Bloomfield. I just want to reiterate that last point that Dr Bloomfield made—sorry, I have a very dry throat today—that it is the virus that is the problem here and not the people. The reports that we are seeing of pockets of anger and blame are completely unacceptable and not only disappointing but also dangerous. So we cannot have people who are feeling unwell not going in or getting a test because they are concerned of the consequences and fearful of a potential backlash.

It's very heartening to see at this point that the cases remain connected to the one cluster. As long as that remains, it means that we can be confident we can put a ring around the cases, and it means that we have much greater predictability. As the director-general has already noted, all the tests from the Morrinsville rest home have returned negative. There have been no further positive tests from close contacts in Tokoroa, and there have been no positive tests from Rotorua or Taupō, although we still encourage those who went to the same places that the known cases visited to get a test if they have cold or flu symptoms.

We've also not seen any positive tests from our border and managed isolation facilities over the last few days, and genome sequencing does not match any of the known cases in these facilities. We continue to test all of these staff, with the aim of every border and MIQ staff member being tested by the end of Monday. Over the past 24 hours, as of 9 o'clock this morning, 583 managed isolation and quarantine staff, 976 airport staff, and 270 maritime staff have been tested. Contact tracing is hitting its target of contacting 80 percent of close contacts within 48 hours to get them into self-isolation for 14 days, and, of course, our level 3 restrictions also help to limit any further spread.

The sheer volume of testing that we are seeing can also give us confidence. Yesterday, our laboratories processed 23,846 tests, bringing the number of tests completed since 12 August to 49,780 and the total number of tests completed nationwide to date to 548,260.

That is, of course, a phenomenal effort. Laboratory capacity has previously been around 12,000 to 13,000 tests per day. So this is starting to give us a very good picture about this cluster. First, the 37 cases we have reported represent only 0.07 percent of all of the tests undertaken, pointing towards a contained outbreak. Secondly, the new cases are following a reasonably predictable pattern. They are all close contacts of known cases in the cluster. So we've not yet seen random cases popping up elsewhere around the country or even in Auckland. So I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everybody who is involved in the testing process. Staff are working around the clock, and we are seeing unprecedented testing being done across the country.

I do want to put a bit of context around that. The surge planning that we had been doing suggested it would take four to six weeks of enabling work to get us ready to support a capacity of 25,000 tests per day, and that also assumed that other lab work would cease. That the labs have achieved this number without that enabling work having been done, whilst other bottlenecks in manual service processes remain, is a tribute to all those working in the labs, and I want to thank them. They're delivering the results on a daily basis, well above previous levels. That is requiring an enormous amount of effort. The volumes that we are seeing, though, mean that some may take up to 48 hours for some of those swabs to be processed through the labs. This is, of course, not the only part of the process. They still then need to be reported back through primary care and back to the patient, and all parts of that process are under pressure, so we do ask people to please be patient as they await their test results.

As I stressed yesterday, it's important that only people who fit the criteria for a test are getting those tests, so that the highest-risk swabs are getting through as quickly as possible. We're managing testing capacity across the country. For example, the Christchurch lab today will be processing 4,000 samples taken from Auckland. This load-balancing means that there is some additional time required in order to transfer samples around the country in order for them to be tested.

We've seen a huge update in the usage of the COVID Tracer app and the display of posters. The number of app registrations has doubled in the last four days, and the number of QR codes on display has also doubled in the last four days. There are now 1,303,200 people using the app, and there are 186,480 QR codes on display around the country. That is excellent news, and I thank all New Zealanders for their work in that regard.

Finally, just briefly on education, I can report that the learning-from-home TV channel will resume from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on weekdays. They'll be back on air on Monday, so you can expect to see Suzy and Karen back on screen. The Ministry of Education will be working with schools around the distribution of digital devices and hard packs of learning materials where there aren't digital devices available. We have hard packs prepared and waiting in the warehouse, ready for distribution to those who need them to continue their learning as a result of the extension of level 3 in Auckland. And with that, happy to take your questions.

Media: Minister Hipkins, you've confirmed that only 60 percent of those Jet Park staff were tested, when you were under the impression that all of them were getting tested. This is the exact same situation that Dr Bloomfield dealt with when he gave them instruction for day three and day 12 testing to take place in managed isolation. It didn't happen. Do you know who is either failing to pass on the message or is failing to actually do what has been instructed, and are they going to lose their jobs?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we will have plenty of time to get into all of that in due course. Our sole focus at this point is responding to the current outbreak and doing all of the testing and contact tracing that we need to be done in order to narrow this cluster down, in order to identify where the source was, and that is what we want everybody focused on. Yes, I've said that it was frustrating that we weren't getting the testing that we needed to, that we expected, and, in the case of the Jet Park, that we had understood was happening. That's frustrating, but, actually, I'm not going to distract people's attention from doing the job at hand to go back over that now. Everyone needs to be focused forward. There will be time to do that later on.

Media: Isn't "frustrating" a little bit light? I mean, it's an embarrassment and it's actually a failure when the Government, yourself—you have to stand up here, as does the director-general, and admit that staff are not doing the job that they have been instructed by you two to do.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, the director-general and I can both go on the information on any given day that we are given. We make every effort to absolutely verify all that information. One of the challenges around testing of MIQ and border staff is that not all of them get tested at the place that they work. So some will be going to community-based assessment centres, some will be going to their local GP for those tests, and it can take some time to reconcile all of that information. Now, obviously, we're doing that at speed now, so we are getting a better picture, because this is obviously where everybody is focused. I'm confident that the information that we're giving you now is absolutely accurate.

Media: Just on the Jet Park Hotel [*Interruption*]*—sorry.*

Media: No, I was just going to say—I mean, you say you're confident, but, Dr Bloomfield, you were confident when you fixed the day three, day 12 situation, and now this has happened. So what's your response to this? Are you fed up with people not doing what you're asking them to do?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: No, I'm not fed up. Like the Minister has said—and just to, again, explain—the testing of staff at managed isolation and quarantine facilities, of which there are 32 around the country, requires both testing-people to be there but also there's a process of making sure that the staff from a range of different workforces, who work shifts—and some of them do a week on and a week off—are actually able to access that testing. Some of the testing is done out in the community, so there's that aspect of it. I have said before that testing was rolling out across the managed isolation and quarantine facilities and at our airports and at our ports, but you would recognise that the different workforces does add complexity.

The final point I want to make here is: this is an additional belt-and-braces part of our already rigorous infection prevention control. Our processes and protocols are really good—

Media: It's the border, though, Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: And again, having visited the Jet Park—and the Minister has as well—I just want to again commend the work of the staff there, who are absolutely dedicated and committed to following those protocols to keep them and their families and the residents safe.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Can I just reiterate that there's a very important point here: that the testing is a backstop. Actually, it is all the prevention work that we do that is critical, and all of that has been getting stronger and stronger and stronger as our response has been continuing.

Media: Minister, do you owe the public an apology for all this? I mean, the buck stops with you, doesn't it?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I absolutely accept responsibility for it. This has been a huge area of focus for me in the seven or so weeks that I've been the Minister of Health. I think every day that I have stood here, I've been talking about that. I've been setting out my expectations very clearly. I've been sharing the information as I've been getting it. I'm leaving no stone unturned in that regard. But look, as I've been very clear about, I'm not going to stop and take a whole lot of time to look backwards. What's really important at this point is that we're looking forwards. At some future point, of course we will look back. Ultimately, I will fully accept responsibility for my part in this equation.

Media: Will you apologise, though?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, in this regard, I have shared the information that I have been given. I think I have been doing everything I possibly can to ensure that the testing that we expect has been happening.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, have we got any more information about the genome testing? In particular, I'm interested to know whether it's been able to link this case with any of the cases that have cropped up overseas which have come from people who have travelled from New Zealand. Is there any linkage there?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So two points to make there. First, no further information and no further linkage between the genome sequence in this current cluster and any of our previous cases for which we have the genome sequencing for people who are in or have been in managed isolation and quarantine. The second is you'll be aware we've been doing some environmental testing, as well, at the Americold store in Mount Wellington. That is being processed today, and I've also had contact from my counterpart in Victoria, who's linked me with their lab there that's doing some genome sequencing on some cases of employees in an Americold cool store there in Melbourne, just, again, to see if there's any possible linkage there. So we're looking also at that possibility. It's part of the overall puzzle, and we're leaving no, sort of, stone unturned.

Media: These travellers who appear—the Belgium traveller and the Japanese traveller today, and the other ones we've had over the last few months that have cropped up overseas—do we have genome sequencing from those cases from our international health counterparts that we're able to cross-examine against this current genome sequencing?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: We don't have that. We've had eight cases. Six have been closed because we've felt they were either old infection or, in fact, there was an error in the reporting. The two currently—I understand we have asked our Japanese counterparts for genome sequencing on that one, but I'll confirm that.

Media: Just on the Jet Park Hotel, are you aware of reports that a fire alarm was pulled earlier today?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, I haven't had any reports about that. I can say, though, that all of our managed isolation and quarantine facilities do have contingency plans, in the event that there is a fire alarm or other emergency, in place there.

Media: Would you be disappointed to learn that people were mixing—people that were infected and people that weren't—in that when they had to go outside?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we'd have to look into that. I do know—because this has arisen before, where there was a fire alarm in a previous facility. We did seek some assurances at the time that there were contingency plans in place, should any such events happen again in the future. So we need a little bit of time to investigate that.

Media: And we've been told that people there have been told to delete videos and photos that have been taken by isolation staff. Is that usual procedure?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, but like I said: the first I've heard of it. Very happy to go away and look into that.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, we understand that the person in hospital worked in a medical centre. What close contacts are being followed up there?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'll come to that. I'll perhaps just pick up on the comment the Minister was making. There has been a fire alarm previously at the Jet Park. In fact, when I was there a couple of weeks ago, one of the things they briefed me on was the protocols they have in place if there is a fire alarm or an emergency that they have to evacuate, and how they keep the separation between the people who are in the hot zone of that facility and the so-called cold zone. But we'll follow up on that example this morning.

Yes, the person who is in hospital, and I think this is—well, I know this is—in the public domain, is a GP in a practice in Mount Wellington. He wasn't symptomatic when he was

last practising there. However, the two days of people who he saw or who attended that medical centre for 48 hours prior to when that person did become symptomatic have been followed up. I think that's over 200 people who are currently being followed up through our close contact centre.

Media: Right. So he didn't treat anyone when he was confirmed to have COVID?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: No, indeed.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, are more Pacific and/or Māori people affected in this Auckland cluster? Do we have an ethnic breakdown?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, I know as of yesterday around 50 percent of the cases identified as Pacific and around 30 percent as Māori. So yes, these are the predominant ethnicities in this particular outbreak. We can give an update on that.

Media: And I know we touched on this last night about moving these COVID-infected people now into motels to isolate instead of at home. Some people called that racist. Do we not trust Pacific whānau to isolate themselves? Really, why have we made this change?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Can I make a comment on that and say that everybody is being treated the same, regardless of their ethnicity, so no ethnicity should feel targeted here. All of the steps that we have put in place are based on the protection of everybody's health, including those who are infected and others. In a quarantine-like situation, we can ensure that people get the healthcare that they need, but we can also keep everybody else safe. So yes, you know, I understand that that's been an anxiety, but I want to reiterate that the conversations that the director-general and I have both had about this are very clear that everybody will be treated the same. But I'm sure he'll want to comment on that as well.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yeah, just two other comments, and I did see that opinion expressed today. What I can say is our Pacific team and Māori team inside the ministry as well as—for example, in the case of the Tokoroa cases, the local iwi have been very involved in working with these whānau both in Tokoroa and in Auckland. One of the key reasons we're creating this opportunity, really, is because we've seen the vast majority of transmission of this virus happens within households. Sometimes that continues even while the family is in self-isolation, because we know it's quite a challenging virus and it can, no matter how hard people try, keep transmitting. Every time another person in the household gets infected, the clock goes back to zero. So I think this is very much about supporting those families to prevent that onward infection inside the families. Again, having visited the Jet Park, where there are families where one member has tested positive but other members don't, there are very good arrangements in place to sort of allow those families to kind of be looked after separately but keep in close communication. The facilities are very used to doing this.

Media: Minister, have you seen or heard any evidence of someone from the index family visiting someone in MIQ?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I have not heard anything about that to date.

Media: There is quite a bit of social media activity around that. Some people are concerned that it's this sort of misinformation stuff that you've commented on before. So you haven't heard anything about that either through social media or—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, social media is not a reliable source of information with regard to these cases. That is what our contact tracing service is designed to achieve. So they will do detailed interviews with everybody involved to identify everybody they've come into contact with. There is a map. They map out all of relationships between all of the different positive test cases to identify where there are links. In some cases, there'll be more than one link, and that's all mapped out very carefully. That's the source of truth that we work to, rather than the reports that we see on social media.

Media: How are our contact tracing systems holding up at the moment? Can they cope with more demand?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I can say the contact tracing systems are not only holding up; they are performing as well if not better than we expected them to. So to run through the numbers—and I have the numbers as of this morning—they're currently working with about 1,090 contacts who need to be contacted; 934 of those have been successfully contacted; 128 of those are awaiting contact, and 28 they're having to do a bit more work to identify contact details for those people.

Media: And in terms of compliance, in Auckland [*Inaudible*] beautiful day, people are out on beaches. There does seem to be a little bit of a relaxing of the mind, maybe. Are you concerned that people have forgotten the rules of level 3?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Can I just plead with all New Zealanders, particularly those in Auckland, who are under level 3, and say that we all want to be out of level 3 as quickly as we can, and people following the rules is the best way for us to ensure that. Businesses are relying on all of us to do our part here, to follow the rules. We want to get businesses open and operating again as quickly as we can. We want to get people back to work as quickly as we can. Please follow the rules. So if you are out doing your daily exercise, make sure you're maintaining social distancing whilst you're doing that. Follow the rules and we will all get through this as quickly as we possibly can.

Media: Minister, just on schools, Auckland principals are concerned their students face a setback. Will you allow any students to return to school, or push NCEA exams and practical assignments back further, to, sort of, even out that disadvantage?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So I have been already working with the Ministry of Education. That work will continue over the weekend, and we should have more to say about that early next week. So we will look at whether there are any additional changes that we need to make around NCEA, whether there's any additional support that we could put in place that can be put in place and should be put in place. So we'll be looking at that. We have got our hard packs of materials ready to go, and we'll be working with schools over the weekend and into early next week to get those hard packs of materials distributed to those who need them.

A lot of work went in during the first lockdown around distribution of digital devices. That work is continuing but with a particular emphasis now obviously on Auckland, where we know that there is that additional need. So no stone will be left unturned. We are looking very, very closely. I am concerned about those NCEA students. I do want to acknowledge that they've had a very, very difficult year in terms of their NCEA being disrupted not once but twice, in the case of those Auckland students. I do acknowledge that. We'll be looking very, very closely at that in the coming days.

Media: Just moving away from, I guess, the technology and laptops and all that, there's concerns students who take art or practical subjects are particularly disadvantaged because they can't access the tools they need. So will you consider potentially letting a smaller number of students who need to go in and finish, I guess, their woodwork project?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So look, we've already pushed out the timetables for those portfolio-related subjects—you know, the deadlines for the submission of portfolios. We pushed them out at the end of the first lockdown. Obviously, I will be looking very closely at the Ministry of Education about (a) what more support could be provided to those students during the lockdown, and (b) whether we need to make any further changes around timetables.

Media: Are you able to give us, if you can, any more detail around the—with your Leader of the House hat on—any details that the Prime Minister will be giving as to when she will be deciding about if the election is to be postponed? Will there be an announcement tomorrow or will we have to wait till Monday?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, obviously the decision that the Prime Minister has to make is whether or not to allow the dissolution of Parliament to go ahead on Monday. If that dissolution goes ahead, then obviously that becomes a matter for the Electoral

Commission. They then determine what the timetable is going forward. If the Prime Minister was to decide to shift the election date herself, then she would need to do that before Monday. Obviously, I'm not going to get into all the ins and outs—that's a matter for the Prime Minister—but that's where the facts of the matter lie.

Media: But just logistically, I suppose, it has to be—she's doing it tomorrow? She will be making that decision and announcing it tomorrow?

Hon Chris Hipkins: If the Parliament isn't dissolved on Monday, then obviously the writs can't be issued for the election. Parliament would come back on Tuesday if there was no dissolution by Monday.

Media: You've mentioned a reluctance from those at the border, working at the border, to get the test, which is why the number has been down. Is that reluctance about the fact that they too had got complacent about how good New Zealand was going and didn't think it was warranted?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, there's a variety of factors there. Again, everybody's getting a test now. That's compulsory, and we have had queues at the testing stations at the airport and at the border for people to get that. They are eager to get that. They're doing their part now. A whole lot of reasons could be speculated on why they haven't done that sooner, but, really, the focus has got to be forward-looking. They are getting the tests now.

Media: Is there any pushback still?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Very little pushback from what I've heard.

Media: And Dr Bloomfield, you've said previously, earlier this week, that there had been some reluctance from those that were the mandatory going into isolation and quarantine families. Has that carried on or are people quite OK with that now?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yeah, they are quite OK. That hasn't—and I think because it was a new thing and early on. But actually, all the whānau who are involved now are working with the teams, and whilst I have issued a directive to medical officers of health to undertake this, that's quite enabling too. It doesn't say you must pick people up and take them to a certain facility; there has to be a quarantine arrangement that's appropriate and that the medical officer of health is comfortable with. In the Auckland region, where the vast majority of the cases are, of course, there is a dedicated facility, and the families seem to be quite comfortable, especially after discussion with getting in there, and that's progressing well.

Media: Can you talk a bit more about the Ports of Tauranga and what's happening there with the testing?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I don't have an update on that, sorry, the Ports of Tauranga, but that was one of the two ports that was being focused on because Americold, I think, also imports into Tauranga.

Media: Why's there only a three-day window to get those tests done for visitors and workers to those two ports?

Hon Chris Hipkins: The reason that we set the 72-hour timetable—and we won't get everybody tested within that 72 hours—was obviously to align with the three-day lockdown. We had a very intensive investigation process going on to try and piece all of the bits of the puzzle together, and everybody's been working around the clock in order to meet those deadlines. We're not quite going to hit that in terms of having everybody tested, but I think the plan is in place to ensure that everybody is tested by the end of the weekend.

Media: What's the point of testing, then, if you're not going to test everyone and get it done? Wouldn't it be better to just get everyone done as soon as you can, and if it means extending the 72 hours, then doing so?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, that is effectively what we have done. So we are getting everybody tested. We're not saying we're going to stop at any point. Everybody will be

tested, and people are working around the clock to make that happen. A lot of effort's going in there.

Media: Those two cases that are still being investigated on the link to the cluster, yesterday's one is the Mount Wellington connection. What is this potential connection that you're seeing in today's?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, it's a close contact of one of the existing cases, so there's every reason to believe that the epidemiological link will be made, but it was just that it had arrived late in the piece and was still being established.

Media: How many Americold staff have tested positive so far?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Look, I haven't got that off the top of my head. What I can say is that all the staff at the airport site and at the Mount Wellington site have been tested, and those that are positive are all at the Mount Wellington site. But we will make a point of just updating, in our media statement, the number that are Americold staff.

Hon Chris Hipkins: So the most recent numbers that I've got are all 41 staff at the airport site have been tested and all were negative. Twenty-six staff have thus far been tested at the Mount Wellington site: six positive, 16 negatives, and four are still awaiting their results. But again, we will give you the most up-to-date numbers.

Media: And just in terms of the contact tracing, have we traced any contacts from this current cluster to an area outside of Auckland that we should be concerned about? I'm hearing reports about a contact visiting the Tūroa ski field and other parts of the region. Is that correct or not?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, the only positive contact results we have are the ones that we have set out for you. Obviously, there's a thousand-odd contacts that have now been identified, I think I indicated previously. I don't have the details of the movements of every one of those thousand, but the way the contact tracing process works: as soon as someone's contacted, they're isolated. We get the testing done, and that highlights whether there is any further follow-up that's required from those.

Media: In terms of the exceptions, what are the exception protocols for leaving Auckland? Can you run us through the matrix of how people can procure an exemption and what you're giving exemptions for?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So there is an application process that's on the Ministry of Health and the COVID-19 website. So the sorts of situations—and the team were working on this last evening. The sorts of situations are where there might be shared care of someone or someone needs, particularly, to go into Auckland to look after a relative. There may well be exceptions around attendance at funerals and tangihanga and other sort of exceptional circumstances like that. So there are some categories that are laid out and also the criteria on which they'll be assessed.

Media: And the movement of essential workers—is that in there as well? If you—

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: That's separate. So the movement of essential workers is actually covered by the order itself.

Hon Chris Hipkins: We'll just have a couple more questions.

Media: We're hearing reports that MBIE's received around 50 complaints about price gouging on face masks. What's the message around that? Is that acceptable?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So, obviously, the issue of price gouging came up during the last lockdown, particularly around supermarkets, and MBIE set up the Price Watch website to monitor that. So if people have concerns, use that facility to make sure that you're reporting any such behaviour. We have been working very closely with the supermarket chains to make sure the distribution of masks is a good one. Obviously, they're working under pressure to make sure that they get the masks distributed. We have quite a good working

relationship with the supermarkets though, but if there's any evidence of that, then we'd like to know about that.

Media: And you had a little bit of a niggle just before. Will you be getting a COVID test?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Just a little bit of morning dry throat—too much talking today and in the last, sort of, 72 hours or so.

Media: So no test?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No test at this point. If I start showing COVID-19 symptoms, of course, I will get a test.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, sorry, can we just circle back to the testing. There have been repeated failures of the testing system under your leadership. Shouldn't you take some responsibility for what's happening and offer your resignation?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, I think the Minister's traversed this very well. I don't think there have been failures of our testing system in this country. Just remember: this country has got the highest rate of testing per confirmed case of any in the world. The testing has been one of the key successes of our response, and as the Minister outlined today, actually, the work that our labs have done to test a huge number of people over the last 24 hours—indeed, the last 72 hours—is I think something we should be acknowledging, that hard work. It's a complex process, testing across a whole range of sites. I would've liked it to have rolled out quicker than it did. It didn't, but I can tell you what: as the Minister said, it sure is now.

Media: This new strain—we've not seen it before. Is there anything that makes it different to how people are getting sick or the symptoms that they have? Is there any difference there?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: No. So it's a strain that has been around for a while, and just with every sort of infection of people, it just changes very, very slightly, the virus. So there is a range of, sort of, I'd call them, variations on a theme. There's nothing about this particular strain that suggests either it's more infectious or less infectious or that it's more, sort of, severe in the illness that it creates.

Media: Minister—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Last question.

Media: There's been quite a lot more, I guess, speculative social media coverage around this outbreak than there was even during the much larger outbreak earlier on. Some of that speculation has proved to have some grounding in fact: the positive test that was later a false positive; the ramen shop, which was a situation which you've elucidated already. Would you consider perhaps delivering more round-the-clock updates through the Ministry of Health to allow yourselves to clamp down on this sort of speculation and get some of it proved correct and other speculation completely discounted, so that people weren't waiting on the 1 p.m. update so much? Because some of this speculation goes like wildfire for hours and hours and hours before you're able to debunk it at this press conference.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah. Look, I'll make a couple of observations on that. The first is, through our testing and contact tracing processes, the people that need to know know as soon as they need to know—as soon as the information is out there. The information that we're putting out each day at 1 o'clock is designed to ensure that we can test the veracity of all of that information, that we can draw all of the links that we need to draw, and give people as complete a picture as possible about what's going on. So yes, for example, the testing results we get in the morning. We then need a bit of time to make sure that the mapping goes on so that we can identify the relationships between all of those cases. I think we'd cause much greater public anxiety if we just released a number of positive tests without being able to say how they linked into the cluster, for example, and that takes a period of time to put all of that information together.

So what we're trying to do is provide as much information, as much public reassurance, in as fast a time frame as we possibly can. But yes, there will always be these situations where people put things up on social media, because in some cases people will be being contacted, because that's the system working as it's intended to work. But my advice to everybody is: if you hear it here at 1 o'clock, it means that it's true. It means that we've tested it, we've checked it, and that they can have confidence in that information. Thanks very much, everybody.

conclusion of press conference