

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 8 JUNE 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. We'll start with a look to the week ahead. Tomorrow I am in Wellington, here, for the House and Cabinet committees, and speaking at the release of the climate commission report here at Parliament. As you'll be aware, at midday we'll be publicly releasing the commission's final advice. The report includes recommendations on New Zealand's emission budgets and policy options to meet those budgets. It provides a road map to meet our climate obligations and to build an economy and country fit and ready for the future. It is up there as one of the most significant documents that I'm likely to receive as Prime Minister and marks a critical milestone in our response to the climate emergency. Whilst, of course, there is a significant process that we, by law, are obliged to undertake upon receiving the report, we have been anticipating it for some time and have not been waiting for it in order to act on the issue of climate change. Since coming into office, we've put climate change at the centre of our policy work and commitments, but there is no question that there is more work to do. More on that tomorrow.

On Thursday I'll be in Hastings visiting Te Taiwhenua o Heretaunga, an organisation offering health education and social services to whānau. I'll be also visiting Wattie's, opening its new processing facility, which is also in Hastings. On Thursday evening I'm speaking at an APEC business engagement event. On Friday I'll be attending the change of command for *HMNZS Manawanui*, a ship I'm the sponsor of, at the Devonport Naval Base.

Today we are in a position to announce that we've received the Pfizer delivery schedule for July, and it includes the delivery of an estimated 1 million doses of the vaccine into New Zealand across the course of the month. These consignments will double the total number of Pfizer doses we've received this year, taking the total to more than 1.9 million—enough to fully vaccinate almost 1 million Kiwis.

Vaccines will arrive in weekly consignments through July, and while we are contractually constrained with what we can say about exact delivery numbers, I can tell you the majority will be delivered in the latter half of the month, as we start to move to the wider general population roll-out of the vaccine. These consignments will enable us to continue vaccinating what we've been calling groups 1, 2, and 3, while giving us the certainty needed to start the general population roll-out as planned.

Group 3, which, as you'll know, is everybody over the age of 65 and people with disabilities and some underlying health conditions, is well in excess of a million people. This news from Pfizer means DHBs can start accelerating their way through that group, but it is a big group, and it will take time.

The vaccine roll-out is the largest and most complex undertaking in our health system's history. We're currently administering around 20,000 doses a day, and the Pfizer deliveries throughout July will enable this to ramp up significantly. At the peak of the programme, across August and September, it's projected that we'll be administering up to 50,000 doses per day. This will add to the significant momentum already being generated by the vaccine programme.

Out of interest, as a proportion of our population, we have fully vaccinated more people than Australia, taking into account population, with just over a total of a quarter of a million New Zealanders, and that's because we've taken a different approach in the way that we're dealing with first and second doses relative to Australia.

Work is well advanced to set up more vaccination sites, deliver mass vaccination events, and bring more GPs and pharmacies on board to help with the roll-out. While we know the ongoing pandemic can impact vaccine delivery schedules, Pfizer has given us further assurance that the remaining deliveries for 2021 are also on track, just as their deliveries to date have been.

We're vaccinating more people each week than our targets, and more than 6,800 vaccinators have completed the necessary training to administer the Pfizer vaccine. It's both exciting but also reassuring to see the programme continuing to ramp up. As we've said many times, we have at our disposal one of the best vaccines in the world, and starting next month we'll begin the process of progressively making it available and, of course, free of charge to every New Zealander over the age of 16.

I know everyone will be keen to hear more detail on the vaccine programme from July through to the end of the year. Now that we have that firm idea of the delivery schedule, Cabinet will receive advice and make further roll-out decisions on Monday. We will then share the outcome of those decisions publicly next week. We'll also include at that point a bit more detail on how the booking system is likely to work for New Zealanders. Also, as we prepare for wider vaccinations for New Zealanders, it's my plan to be vaccinated at the end of next week. Now we're happy to take questions.

Media: Prime Minister, what did you have to do to secure that 1 million in vaccinations?

PM: Well, it's fair to say the relationship between New Zealand and Pfizer has been really solid, and throughout the programme they've been meeting the commitments they've made to us. What we were seeking, really, was just a bit more certainty over what that delivery schedule was likely to look like for July as we prepare to ramp up through to the end of the year.

Media: So our ability to vaccinate the population was in doubt before this conversation?

PM: No. No, no. This is just really the sequencing. So, you know, being able to confirm that we are receiving enough vaccines to continue that ramp-up through the course of that month enables us to continue with the roll-out through the over-65s and then going into the wider population.

Media: So they will be able to just confirm this publicly to you, but we had already planned to—

PM: So the general issue that we've been having is that whilst we've received guidance on what we'll get in total over quarters, those weekly deliveries and those deliveries over the course of a month, we don't get well in advance. So it's often not easy for us to dictate how we ramp up our schedule because we're not getting those delivery programmes well in advance. We now know what we're receiving in July will enable us to keep ramping up, because, as you'll know, we've been vaccinating more than we've been receiving in recent times. Minister Hipkins, do you want to speak to that?

Media: So back to my first question, then, what did you have to do to be able to secure this announcement from Pfizer? Did you have to put pressure on them? Is it because the rest of the world didn't need them as much?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, Pfizer have been really good and really open in their communications with us. Once they've locked in a delivery schedule, they absolutely stick to it. Obviously, they've got a number of orders around the world that they're balancing out, and they're wanting to give certainty to everybody who's ordering from them. So they've indicated our profile, which is obviously we're going to get more in the first couple of weeks of July than we've been getting up until now, and then even more in weeks three and four, and that really works with our ramping up. It means that, you know, DHBs can now start to gear up with certainty, knowing exactly what deliveries they're going to get.

What Pfizer have also been doing, which, again, is very helpful, is indicating that we're not going to drop down again. So they're ramping it up in terms of what they're delivering to us in a sustainable way so that by the end of July they're not suddenly going to say, in August, "Oh, you're going to get less in August than you've got in July." So that's really important for us so that we can just keep scaling up sustainably.

Media: Obviously we want our population to be vaccinated, but do you harbour any concerns about getting such a large quantity of vaccines when there are countries who are feeling the effects of COVID so much more starkly than we are?

PM: Well, I think actually what we've been accused of is the opposite. I think, you know, we've been very mindful of the fact that, yes, we have a job to do to make sure we keep New Zealanders safe, and we've used the border in order to do that, but increasingly, of course, we want that extra layer of certainty that comes with having a vaccinated population as well, because, of course, we all still run the risk of outbreaks, and this means that if that's to occur, we're protecting individuals. At the same time, though, New Zealand is not at a stage where we've vaccinated as many members of our population as other countries which are experiencing third waves and have seen, unfortunately, the loss of life. And that's because they do need to be prioritised as well. So I think we're in the right part, in the right order, globally, when it comes to our vaccination roll-out.

Media: Can you commit, with these 1 million more doses, that the time frame, that's been slipping significantly, will stop slipping now and you'll be able to play catch-up?

PM: I would disagree with that. Against our plans and our planned roll-out, we have been delivering more vaccine and vaccinating more people than even we'd been schedule to do so. You'll recall that one of the concerns we've had is because we tend to get a delivery schedule quite close to when we receive it, one of the concerns has been that we've potentially ramping up too quickly and that we might have a gap in our programme. We now feel assured that that won't occur.

Media: Prime Minister, why do you compare yourself to Australia in terms of the vaccine roll-out when that's been in Australia a national scandal and universally seen as too slow?

PM: Oh, well, again, what I simply made the comparison around was fully vaccinated, because we made a decision that we didn't want to stagger first and second to the degree that many other countries had. The other reason that, you know, I think it's natural that we'll tend to look at one another is because there aren't many countries in the world that are in the same position as New Zealand and Australia. So we wouldn't expect to be receiving vaccine at the same rate as many other countries, because they are experiencing loss of life. We're much more aligned with the likes of Australia, Vietnam in terms of numbers, even, previously, Taiwan. But there's a very small group to compare ourselves to.

Media: Can I also ask—your vaccination's coming up next week, you just said. I understand the Opposition leader Judith Collins has reached out to you to suggest that you could both get the vaccine together in a sign of political unity. What do you think?

PM: I've always been very clear that we should be offering to other political party leaders, at the same, roughly, point in the calendar, to be able to receive their vaccine. But I'm not going to put it upon any other political party that they need to sit alongside anyone else while being vaccinated.

Media: Are we going to receive enough shipments of the vaccine in early July so that we don't have to slow down the roll-out?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We are working with the DHBs. DHBs have certainly indicated from July they can scale up quite quickly. We're working with them just to make sure that we smooth that, to make sure that we lock in what they are doing in that first part of July to align with what the deliveries are that we are expecting.

PM: So you will have heard us referencing that we're expecting the larger shipments to be in the second half, but this allows them to keep ramping up through the over-65 age group through the course of that month. We will want to share a little bit more detail then on what the extra phasing looks like next week.

Media: We're not going to run out in the beginning of July?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, we shouldn't do, based on the deliveries that we know we're going to get a reasonable amount through June as we finish up the deliveries that are already scheduled. We'll have a few extra doses coming through our COVAX allocation during that time, and then through July, as I said, we've now got the confirmation of a million through July.

PM: So if it gives you any kind of indication, even though we can't give those exact weekly amounts because of the obligations on us, I can tell you that at least for our existing programme I breathed a sigh of relief when I got a message from Minister Hipkins telling me what July was looking like. So it will still take planning, but we don't have quite the same anxiety we had previously that we were ramping up maybe too quickly for the deliveries.

Media: Why do you think you have such big gaps in our priority 1 group, like 4,000 non-MIQ border workers still yet to get a first vaccine jab and half of their household contacts are still yet to be vaccinated at all, but they are supposed to be providing our vaccine safety barrier at the border?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So as I indicated to you earlier on when we had this conversation, there are some data issues around that. So, for example, if a household contact of a border worker goes in and gets vaccinated and does not say that they are a household contact, it may not be recorded against them. We also don't have contact details for all of those people unless the border worker, when they are being vaccinated, supplies those household contact details. So there are some data issues around that. It's likely that the vaccination rates in that group, that 1B group, are slightly higher than what the data is recording. We're working through a sort of data-cleansing process to make sure that all of that information tallies up.

Media: Prime Minister, how significant is Operation Trojan Shield—the organised crime bust that New Zealand was involved in overnight?

PM: Well, if you just look at the numbers—I mean, the amount that has been confiscated as part of that, the number of arrests and of quite senior gang members—you can see its scale is significant. One of the points that I know the police have made is that increasingly organised crime has an international element to it, and that's why as a Government we have invested in ensuring we have those extra investigators working in the organised crime space. And I'd like to think the results of today are testament that that was a wise investment.

Media: How much of an impact do you think it would have on organised crime in New Zealand, and actually just at a street level?

PM: Yeah, when you've got 300 officers, 37 search warrants across the North Island, a million dollars in cash that has been recovered, 35 arrests, 900 charges—that is a significant event. No doubt it will have an impact on organised crime in New Zealand.

Media: Did it take the FBI and other big guys like that to come in and target gangs in New Zealand?

PM: No, no. And I think the point that I would make here is that for a small country we already, and continue to have, very strong links with our international counterparts, whether that's the AFP or the FBI, and those existing relationships really matter. But this, I think, is a recognition of that fact that, increasingly, gang activity has an international element to it, and that means we need to work internationally. And in this case you've seen the results of that work.

Media: In terms of community drug harm, what kind of an impact do you think it might have?

PM: Often we're able to estimate the impact, the reduction in harm that we'll see in our communities as a result. I haven't seen the estimates on that, early days yet, but you can see with the number of arrests, the significance particularly around methamphetamine, but also the plans that will have been halted as a result of this work. It is, undoubtedly, very significant

Media: How many of those arrested are 501s?

PM: I think it fair to acknowledge here that traditionally we tend to refer to particular gangs as being associated with Australian gangs. Here we have a range of gangs that are being involved in this particular case.

Media: Minister Hipkins, just back on the vaccinations, what information have you received about particular regions that are behind? The Taranaki District Health Board, for example, is saying that it hasn't got the staff yet to roll out, and group 3 people haven't been approached to do any vaccinating.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah, I do get a regular breakdown. In fact, we release a DHB by DHB breakdown every week, in terms of where they are at. Some DHBs are more ambitious than others in terms of their early roll-out. I've mentioned before that Northland were incredibly ambitious at the beginning, but actually set themselves a slightly unrealistic target at the beginning—but actually are doing very, very well relative to other DHBs when you weight it for their population size. Taranaki is one of the DHBs where I would like to see them lifting their overall delivery of it.

Media: Because for the people living there it, effectively, becomes a bit of a postcode lottery, doesn't it?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, once we get to the point where we're scaling up significantly, by mid-July, then all DHBs are going to be having to really pump through their vaccinations.

PM: As we've seen from some of the numbers, obviously, we're working hard to train up a wider workforce. One of the exercises that's been gone through is personally contacting all those who made themselves available during the course of the COVID recovery to see whether or not they continue to be available for, for instance, the vaccine roll-out. So those are the kinds of initiatives taking place at the moment to try and support where there maybe workforce needs. That's alongside, for instance, using those who are in training in our medical workforce to try and deploy them to support those where there are workforce needs.

Media: Because is the onus on the Taranaki District Health Board or is the onus on the Ministry of Health to actually make sure people get there to do the job?

PM: They are working together. On the DHB call that I had, not so long ago—and Minister Hipkins has them more regularly—if a DHB is encountering issues with workforce, then there will be efforts made by the Ministry of Health to try and support them. So those wider initiatives in trying to contact and locate workforce to support the roll-out, you know, there will be a part played by the Ministry of Health.

Media: When you're talking about the peak roll-out, the Auditor-General here's saying that the ministry's own forecasting was that it required to deliver 67,000 doses each day for a period of seven weeks, whereas today the information is that at peak it'll be 50,000 per day. Why the difference?

PM: We always said 50,000.

Hon Chris Hipkins: We always said that the peak would be about 50,000, bearing in mind that, of course, the faster we go early—and we're currently well ahead of plan—then that reduces the peak demand as we get into the latter part of the year.

Media: So why was the Auditor-General under the impression that it was the ministry's own forecasting that said that they would need to do 76,000 a day?

Hon Chris Hipkins: You'd have to ask the Auditor-General that.

Media: So it's just plainly wrong?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we've always said, and based on the modelling that I have seen and that we've been working to, it sits around that 50,000 a day marker.

PM: Happy to look at it though.

Media: Will you have both your jobs before you go to Australia or just your first one?

PM: Look, I haven't made my Australia trip contingent on completing the vaccine for myself, including those two doses, just in the same way we haven't made it contingent on any other New Zealander who may be travelling there.

Media: Would that be smart, though, given the number of people you come into contact with?

PM: Look, there's number of people who work in different fields who will come into contact with a wide range of people in their place of work. For me, it's been important that I allow those who are in the most at-risk groups—and I consider those to be those who work at our border, who work in health—to be prioritised. I'm choosing to be vaccinated at this point in order to play my role in demonstrating that I consider it to be absolutely safe, but also really critical to keep others safe.

Media: When will you get vaccinated?

PM: At the end of next week. We'll give you the exact details next week.

Media: In terms of the National Party—

PM: I'm assuming some of you will want to record the delightful moment.

Media: The National Party has, I guess, sort of highlighted in the last year or so some issues with their candidate selection and their vetting processes, which they're working through at the moment. Has what's happened there given you any sense of, perhaps, talking to the party about how you tackle those sorts of issues coming into the next election, particularly around the social media space and how it's constantly evolving, and what sort of further checks you do to check on candidates in that way?

PM: Actually, it's not really the activities of any other party that drives us to constantly try and improve our process for identifying suitable candidates, or, indeed, recruiting certain candidates. For us, we're constantly have to make sure that we have a system in place that's both democratic—because that's how our party operates—but also has a level of scrutiny within it that means that if there are issues, we can identify them early on. So that's not triggered by anyone else. That's something that as a party member I've seen the party being involved with constantly over the last 10 years.

Media: In terms of social media, is that a particular issue for you that you want to be on top of because of how quickly things move in that space?

PM: Well, we're constantly looking out for the things that are key competencies for new members of Parliament. We want them to be representative of their communities. We want them to have a skill set that we may need or desire in Parliament. We want them to be good organisers. We want them to be able to connect with their communities. If they've been on social media for a time, of course we'll be mindful about the way that they engage with others, and that's a very public part of people's profile, where you can see how they tend to engage with others. All of that builds a picture of a person. Ultimately, that will then help inform decision making both locally from local members who will be a part of the selection but also representatives from the parties who are part of selection as well.

Media: But didn't it take, last election, us pointing out to you that one of your candidates had been making Islamophobic comments on Twitter for you to sack them? So are your vetting processes rigorous enough?

PM: Yeah, I mean, what you've pointed out there was, from memory, something that was posted, I think, more than five years ago—

Media: Does that make it OK?

PM: No, not at all, and you will have seen that there was a response, I think, that indicated that that was not OK. I'm not saying necessarily that those systems will be perfect on every occasion, but they do exist. We try and take a very well-rounded view of all aspects of a person's past working life and community life. From time to time, if we haven't tracked

back far enough, we may miss something, but I think there is certainly more rigor in the process now than there was, say, 10 years ago.

Media: Are you embarrassed or upset that nurses feel like they need to strike to get a pay deal from your Government?

PM: Of course, labour laws in New Zealand enable people to use that mechanism in order to—as part of a pay negotiation.

Media: It's not a sign of [*Inaudible*], is it?

PM: Well, I reject any idea that that's not part of our system or that that is something that we shouldn't have as part of our system. We've had negotiations that have involved strike action before, and that is part of New Zealand's history and part of our labour laws.

Media: I don't think they struck under a National Government; I'm happy to be proven wrong. But why is this happening now? Do you think that—

PM: That's probably more a question, probably, for the NZNO than it is for me. But one point that I would make is that in these COVID times it is tough, so what we've tried to do is really focus in on an offer that really lifts those on the lowest pay bands. So in those areas, for health assistants or enrolled nurses, you're seeing upwards of 10 percent increases for those in that part of the workforce. But in other areas you've seen an increase that is more akin to what we saw in the GFC. At the moment nurses have put an offer that is more like 17 percent. We're just not in the position to meet those expectations. That's not stopping us from trying to lift the wages of the lowest paid.

Media: So their hopes were unrealistic—that's the problem?

PM: Obviously, there's a negotiating position that's been put forward by the DHBs, and there's a negotiating position from the nurses. At the moment, you can see there's a gap in between the two. Our job as part of negotiations is to work that through.

Media: Do you think this will be the start of continued strike action, or do you hope that this will be the end of it?

PM: Look, we enter into bargaining in good faith, so I'm not going to pre-empt the outcome of any of that. But this isn't, obviously, the first time that we've been in negotiation with the nurses. We had an agreement reached under the last term of office that was worth hundreds of millions and was one of the more significant increases they'd seen in the last 10 years. The circumstances we find ourselves in now are vastly different.

Media: Are nurses paid enough?

PM: Look, I'd have to say, for a number of our public sector I would like to keep seeing them increase, but I have to take into account the circumstance that we're in. That isn't stopping us from offering an increase for those on the lowest pay and those on the lowest wages, particularly our healthcare assistants, particularly our enrolled nurses, and even the starting out wages for our nurses. We want to continue to encourage people to enter in that workforce. I think that means lifting those bands.

Media: Just to follow up on Thomas' question, Dr Bloomfield has previously said that the vaccine roll-out could hit a peak of 60,000 daily doses, and the ministry is modelling does say that you'd get to 76,000 doses a day for about 50 days straight. Is it your understanding that that 50,000 dose limit—that that's the peak that we'll be able to reach, or—

PM: No, I think it would be unfair to describe these things as limits. I think what we're indicating is that we're at 20,000 now; there will be a considerable ramp-up at the peak of roll-out.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I think if you look at what we're doing now, for example—we're doing 100,000, roughly, a week—that's not even. In the weekends those numbers can be quite low, and then they can get up to quite a high peak. So we're talking about sort of a

spread of 50,000 a day. That doesn't mean that on some days we won't go significantly higher than that; we may do. But then on other days it will be lower than that.

Media: Do you have confidence in the ministry being able to achieve that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: It's not a question of the ministry, actually. The administration of the vaccine is going to fall largely to the front-line health workers—to the district health boards, GP practices, and to others. Am I confident that we've got good systems in place? Yes, I am.

Media: Looking at your numbers, so there's about roughly a million doses which are either in transit or in the country, and there's 1 million doses—so you've still got, like, 2.2 to 3 million people in groups 1, 2, and 3. How can you say this is a ramp up? Isn't it a catch-up?

PM: No.

Media: But, it's, you know, you're barely getting—you'll still need another 2 million doses to get through the rest of groups 1, 2, and 3 before you even hit group 4, which is set to start in July.

PM: Well, as we've said, there's 1 million just in group 3 alone. Now, not everyone comes out and seeks to be vaccinated at the moment that eligibility opens. We have to make sure that we're continuing to increase the capacity to vaccinate a large number of people as those groups come into eligibility. There's no cut-off date for when over-65s can no longer be vaccinated. They will continue to have that opportunity throughout the course of the year and beyond, but our goal is to bring in as many New Zealanders as possible to meet our supply as we go.

Hon Chris Hipkins: And there'll be some people in group 3 who will wait until other people who they are connected with in group 4 are eligible, and then they'll all get vaccinated together. So it's not going to be completely linear.

Media: But that sounds like you're relying on people not rushing to get vaccinated. But isn't the—

PM: Not at all.

Media: —messaging to encourage people?

PM: Not at all, but the point I'm making is that there is no close-off date. We open eligibility, and people are then able to come through, and we continue to see people coming through who may have been eligible a month ago, but are only choosing to do so now. And, look, that's a reflection of even the research that we're seeing. It wasn't that long ago that the number of New Zealanders willing to be vaccinated was in the 60 percent range. It's now over 70 percent, so people's willingness is increasing as they know people who are being vaccinated, or as they see others being vaccinated. So we'll continue to see that uptake.

Media: But at the crux of it, though, you do have to rely on people not all wanting to get it, because you actually don't have the amount?

PM: Oh, look, and that's obviously why we've run a tiered system. We've always said we won't get all of our vaccine doses arriving in the country at once, and, actually, no country has operated like that. So that's why we've run a tiered system that opens up eligibility.

Media: It kind of undermines the messaging, though, doesn't it, when you're saying to people, "Come and get vaccinated.", and saying that, actually, you can't vaccinate—

PM: I don't think any New Zealander expected us to vaccinate every single New Zealander in one week or in one month. No country has done that. But what we are trying to do is prepare people that when their time comes that they're willing to be vaccinated.

Media: But I think people in group 3 who are immunocompromised and were told that they could get the vaccine from May and still can't get a date in the diary—

PM: Every DHB currently is, at some level, open to group 3. It's at different paces.

Hon Chris Hipkins: So 100,000 people in group 3 have already had at least one dose of the vaccine.

Media: So that could be one person in one DHB, in group 3, has had—

PM: My recollection—I've looked at all the DHB data—there's no DHB that's performing at that rate. But there is some variation. Again, next week, we'll be talking in a little bit more detail about the way that we expect, based on the supply we're receiving, the way for the programme to run through to the end of the year.

Media: We've also been told that there actually isn't data for how many people—

PM: Just warning I'm just going to take a couple more questions. Sorry, go on.

Media: We've also been told that there isn't data for people in groups 2 or 3 or even 1B—if you're not recording whether someone's a border worker, how can you be sure that the roll-out has reached group 3?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So we absolutely have very good data for group 1A, which are our border workers, and that data—there are still, you know, anomalies at the edges, which we're working our way through just to make sure that that's all clean and tidy. So, for example, in our MIQ workforce, we know that everybody who shows up at work each day is vaccinated, because they produce evidence to show that they are, but we're making sure that the databases are all recording all of that correctly. And we're talking about just the last 1 or 2 percent, you know, in terms of making sure that that data is all accurate. But I can tell you that we check to make sure that they are vaccinated before they are allowed on site, so that is working smoothly.

In terms of that group 1B, which are the household contacts, as I've indicated, we don't necessarily have the names and addresses of absolutely everybody who's in that group. So that's about them coming forward; it's optional for that group. And then, in terms of group 2, again, it's up to them to come forward, with encouragement, to get their vaccination. But, again, it's not mandatory for group 2.

PM: OK, any other questions? All right. Thank you, everyone.

conclusion of press conference