

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 2018

PM: Kia ora. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm sure everyone is looking forward to the final parliamentary session for the year. I want to give a quick rundown of the week ahead, and you'll find that the remaining weeks that we have in front of us remain as busy as ever. Today I'm joined by Minister David Clark to talk a little bit further on the health issues that you've just been briefed on.

On Tuesday, the Child Poverty Reduction Bill will be going through the committee of the whole stage in the House. I will be in the House tomorrow afternoon for the start of this discussion as the Minister in charge of the bill. On Wednesday, we will be receiving the report on the Government inquiry into mental health and addiction, and we anticipate taking just a little bit of time to go through that report and, no doubt, its substantial findings before that report will be released, and it will be released before the end of the year. On Thursday, I'm off to the West Coast with Ministers Jones and O'Connor to announce a range of projects to support regional development, employment, and infrastructure development. On Friday, I will be going to Island Bay with Minister Clark to make another health announcement, and visiting Gisborne to speak at a Historic Places Trust event.

So today I have the Minister of Health with me to talk through our action on meningococcal W. We've seen a sharp increase in the cases of meningococcal disease this year and, in particular, the men-W strain of the disease, which you will have just been briefed on. Meningococcal disease can develop very quickly and can cause death or permanent disability. It can affect anyone, but it's more common in children under the age of five, teenagers, and young adults. So far, 29 people have contracted the specific strain this year that you've been briefed on, and that is more than twice as many as in 2017. It has a high mortality rate and, tragically, it has killed three people in Northland this year. Northland has been particularly hard hit by this disease, and the official advice is that it has reached outbreak level there. As a result, we are announcing today that the Northland DHB will be launching a targeted vaccination programme designed to contain the outbreak and arrest the spread of men-W.

We know vaccination programmes work, and we know they work for meningococcal disease because we've done this before and we've been down this road before. Between 2004 and 2006, there was a nationwide vaccination campaign to deal with meningococcal B. As a result, the number of cases fell from about 300 a year in 2001 to just 30 in 2010. Then, in 2011, a localised vaccination programme was launched in Northland to deal with an outbreak of meningococcal C. This stopped the outbreak and Northland has only had two cases of meningococcal C since then. We aim to repeat that success in dealing with the current outbreak in Northland.

I'll now hand over to the Minister of Health, who will tell you a little bit more about the planned vaccination programme.

Hon Dr David Clark: Thank you, Prime Minister. Meningococcal is a terrible disease, but as you've heard the Prime Minister say, it's one that we have some experience dealing with as a country. In the last few weeks, Pharmac and the Ministry of Health have sourced 20,000 doses of the vaccine that covers the meningococcal W strain as well as strains A, C, and Y. The first 10,000 doses will arrive in the country next week, with the remainder arriving a few weeks later. This will allow the Northland DHB to begin an urgent targeted vaccination programme starting the week of 5 December.

The vaccination programme will target Northland residents who are aged nine months to four years inclusive, and those aged 13 to 19 years inclusive. These age groups were selected for good reason. Teenagers and young adults are known to be the main carriers of meningococcal disease—they are the ones most likely to spread it through the community—and children under five are considered most at risk from the disease. Our expert advice is

that vaccinating these two age groups is the best way to reduce the spread of meningococcal disease across the entire Northland community. This, in turn, helps to protect everybody, even if they don't qualify for the free vaccination.

Launching a vaccination programme now, when the school year is almost over and the holiday season is close, will be challenging for the DHB. However, it is important that we begin this work as soon as possible. It's worth noting that there is a strong international demand for the meningococcal W vaccine, which is in short supply, so I want to congratulate Pharmac and the Ministry of Health for securing sufficient vaccine to run the campaign.

Pharmac and the ministry will continue to investigate the availability of further doses of the vaccine as a contingency, in case a further roll-out of the programme is recommended.

Can I just end by reminding people that the symptoms of meningococcal disease can be similar to other diseases such as the flu, and can include high fever, headache, sleepiness, and joint and muscle pain. More specific symptoms include a stiff neck, dislike of bright lights, vomiting, and a rash.

Can I please issue the advice: don't take a chance. If someone you know or you are suffering from any of these symptoms, please seek medical help and have the symptoms reviewed by an expert. Happy to take questions.

Media: Did you try to secure more than 20,000 doses of the vaccination?

Hon Dr David Clark: My advice is that the ministry is examining possibilities for locating more should we need that as a contingency.

Media: Did we try and get more than 20,000 initially?

Hon Dr David Clark: I think the call went out to see what was available and easy to achieve in a short space of time.

Media: What should parents do—those in Northland and also in Auckland, for example? What's your advice to those two groups?

Hon Dr David Clark: Parents should look out for symptoms. Meningococcal disease is not new to New Zealand. This particular outbreak has only been recently declared, but many are familiar with the symptoms. If any of those symptoms arrive, please seek help; make sure you get to a GP—GP visits for kids that age are free for young kids, so please get there and make sure you get the symptoms checked out early.

Media: But what should they do now? You don't want a rush of people going to their GP—should they sit back and wait for their—

Hon Dr David Clark: No, if any symptoms arise, they should seek medical help. If there aren't any symptoms, well, you know, let's not create alarm, but if any symptoms arise they should seek medical help.

Media: How do you decide what is an outbreak? There's only 27 people that have been identified with the disease—

PM: That would be a technical question; do you want me to get the technical experts—

Hon Dr David Clark: Yeah, do you want the—

Media: I just find it—because outbreak sounds so dramatic.

Hon Dr David Clark: The expert advisory group convenes and convened very quickly, and it was their judgement that this constitutes an outbreak.

Media: Given that the DHB was concerned about this back in May, are you confident that no deaths could have been avoided had the Government not acted sooner?

Hon Dr David Clark: Ah, look, this is not an easy question, because, ultimately, there is some randomness to the incidence of the disease, and we know that the warning signs have been increasing, and so I was pleased that the group convened and very quickly reached a conclusion that this was an outbreak and that action should proceed immediately, and it has.

Media: Can I just clarify—with those 10,000 vaccinations that we start the week after next, so will students who are in those targeted age groups—will they, next time they go to the GP, will they receive it? How is that going to work? What should parents do?

Hon Dr David Clark: It's being done through community centres and through schools. I don't know whether the expert group wants to add to that, but it's going to be carried out promptly. The idea is to get there before the school year ends so we can actually achieve the coverage that will stop the spread.

PM: My understanding is other vaccinations are often delivered through schools, and that's the most efficient and best way to act—

Media: So that's how it would work—through schools?

Hon Dr David Clark: Yep—anticipating an 80 percent take-up rate.

PM: I'm getting a nod from our officials that, yes, that's their expectation.

Media: Can I ask why you're not—and it might be a question for your experts—why you're not vaccinating for men-V?

Hon Dr David Clark: Well, I can tell you, but we could ask for more from the experts. The meningococcal W strain has proved to be particularly dangerous. I'll ask officials to correct me if I'm wrong, but a third of the deaths in the recent period are attributable to meningococcal W. Whilst it's not a third of the cases, it is a dangerous strain, and wherever there's evidence that its incidence is increasing, I think we're well advised to seek advice on whether there's an outbreak.

Media: But that then covers three other strains, and none of those are—

Hon Dr David Clark: Right, but the other strains—I mean, they will be part of a combined vaccine that is readily available. There's no harm in vaccinating for those other strains of the disease as well, and sometimes the other strains can also cause serious illness or death.

PM: Right. Other questions? Sorry—on meningococcal? Moving on?

Media: Something else.

PM: OK, right. Thank you, Minister Clark.

Media: A senior PNG journalist has been suspended for sharing a story about you choosing not to use the Maserati fleet at APEC; did that concern you?

PM: Oh, I haven't received that advice or been informed of that, so difficult for me to comment on the circumstances of that suspension. But I undertake to take a look at that and provide you comment if there's anything for me to say on it.

Media: But would it concern you if the PNG Government had taken this action?

PM: Again, I would want to look at the case first before I provide comment on that, but I've not seen that. I absolutely stand by not using the Maseratis though, in part, of course, because there was no need for us; we had a vehicle available.

Media: Prime Minister, the immigration Minister, as I understand it, received the papers on Karel Sroubek. When are we likely to see a decision?

PM: Very soon.

Media: Like, when you say "very soon", when?

PM: Very soon, Barry. You won't be waiting too much longer. But that's for the Minister to brief you on as soon as he's able.

Media: Have you seen it?

PM: No.

Media: On the hospital pay rate increases for cleaners and security guards and orderlies, they've come to a resolution without having to strike. Why do you think it's different in this case?

PM: Oh, look, obviously those agreements were negotiated at DHB level and, as I've seen reported, we, of course, as a Government did have a hope and an expectation that we would see priority placed around those on the lowest wages, and seeing the story of one of those cleaners directly affected by that and the difference that will make for her life and just her being able to have more contact with her family, you can see why this has been a priority, generally, for this Government to try and lift the wages of those on the lowest incomes.

Media: Do you think it's because they have less leverage, though? Is that why they're not—

PM: No, I wouldn't argue that, no. Again, the questions that you'd be well placed to ask E tū, specifically, but no, that wouldn't be my bet.

Media: DHBs will have to fund this out of baseline budgets. Will the Government be looking at any sort of extra funding for DHBs to cover the higher cost of wages?

PM: And you'll be aware that they received a significant increase in their funding in the last Budget.

Media: Anne-Marie Brady has said that the Government should get some guts and say something to China about alleged tampering in academic freedom in New Zealand. She says that the Government has received the report.

PM: Yeah, I saw that comment and, look, I've been advised that the police are still investigating the case. I've received no report, and so I can't speak to the report she claims I have. I simply do not have it. And, as I say, my understanding—I've been advised that police are still investigating the issues Anne-Marie Brady has raised. Look, you know, quite frankly, if I received a direct report that said that there was an issue there that could be directly attributable to China or at China's direction, we would act on that, but I have not received such information.

Media: So is it safe for New Zealanders to speak up against Chinese influence?

PM: Oh, I absolutely defend the right of academics to utilise their academic freedom, and, of course, the rights that are granted to them through our legislation. I absolutely support that and defend that. They should continue to be able to do their work and with freedom from repercussion from this Government or any other Government. But, look, there's been a claim that I have a report that I simply do not have.

Media: Are you concerned about the length of time that it took—I think it's been about ten or 11 months since it happened?

PM: Yeah, and there's been, of course, a subsequent incident in that time, but just in the same way that I have to preserve the right of academics to speak freely without interference from Government, I also have to preserve the right of the police to be able to act without interference, as well. So I do have to let them undertake that investigation.

Media: You said you would act on it. What does that mean?

PM: Oh, well, look, if I received a report that raised concerns around the source of anything that Ms Brady had experienced, then of course I would then take advice on how to deal with that, but my point is that I have not received such a report.

Media: Does that include direct conversations with Chinese officials?

PM: Oh, I won't get into a hypothetical; I'd take advice if I received that report. But, as I say, I haven't. Obviously, the most important thing here is that the police conduct that investigation.

Media: So will you ditch Huawei technology in New Zealand at the request of the US?

PM: We have a specific regulatory framework in New Zealand that we operate under. For instance, in New Zealand we have the TICSAs legislation. That's a process that we go through whenever there's a specific request that may impact on our national security. It's agnostic around provider; it simply looks at the issues that New Zealand needs to take into account. So that's our framework. We maintain our independent foreign policy status, so we determine those issues case by case, not at the direction of anyone else.

Media: Has Mike Pence or anyone from the US Government or the Australian Government—

PM: Sorry—I should correct myself. It's country-neutral when we make those decisions.

Media: So has Mike Pence or anyone from the US or Australian Governments lobbied or advised or asked that you not include Huawei's—

PM: Look, regardless—speaking to that hypothetical, regardless of whether they did or they didn't, New Zealand has an independent foreign policy. We have a regulatory framework that sets out the process that we go through for any decision that may impact on our security network, and that will always be the process that we will follow.

Media: So there's a regulatory aspect to it, but would you take into account New Zealand's relationship with China and the wider trade and foreign affairs relationship—

PM: Actually, our Telecommunications (Interception Capability and Security) Act sets out—and it's been there for four years now. It sets out the process that we go through. It's very explicit. It's transparent around what we need to do. That helps us determine the risk to our network, and that's the basis on which we make those decisions.

Media: So you're saying New Zealand's wider relationship with China would have no role to play in this decision?

PM: It's set out in TICSAs how we make those decisions as they relate to compliance, and that's the way we should make those decisions, I would have to say.

Media: So will this be a decision made at a Cabinet meeting, or is it just something officials do?

PM: It's a decision that—there's multiple layers to the process. I could get you a little note on how it works, but it's primarily a regulatory framework. It does involve Ministers at certain points, though.

Media: Is \$23 million too much for the NZTA to spend on teaching kids how to ride bikes when it has more pressing issues?

PM: This is—I think you're referring to one of the announcements that is pending?

Media: No, it's been made.

PM: Oh, it was made this afternoon, was it not? "Is it too much to spend on", did you say—sorry, your question?

Media: Yeah. Is \$23 million too much for the NZTA to be spending on teaching children to ride bikes when they've got—

PM: There is a safety element, I think. A safety element could be argued there around the way that—the modes of transport that kids are using, at what age they're using them, and how they're accessing not only school but just generally their transportation. And so, you know, I think there is an argument to be made for making sure that kids are able to do that safely.

Media: What about your trip to China? Have we been snubbed by China?

PM: No. No, I wouldn't describe it in that way at all. It's simply a scheduling matter for us. It was raised with me when I met with Premier Li. He, of course, mentioned that we were both working towards the aspiration of that visit and we're continuing to work through the scheduling issues that we have.

Media: Are they scheduling issues on your end or on his end?

PM: There's been a little bit of both, but, again, I'm sure we'll find a time that works for us both. If there were any issues, of course, it probably would be unlikely that I would have had that meeting with Premier Li in the first place.

Media: So would you expect to meet, in any visit, the President?

PM: Would I expect to meet the President when I travel there, or before then?

Media: When you travel there.

PM: Look, I imagine that would be, usually, part of the programme and agenda. I, of course, met the President before, last year, and in the margins of the meetings in recent days. But we haven't set down a programme, obviously, because we haven't firmly scheduled when that visit will take place.

Media: Are you going to visit Canberra and visit the new—not really new any more—Australian Prime Minister?

PM: Yeah, well, obviously, we met in the margins in Singapore and had a set-down bilateral, but also quite a bit of contact in PNG as well. And we've got—it's his turn to visit me this time, so we'll be meeting in New Zealand early-ish in the new year.

Media: The workplace relations amendment bill is back from—it's finally in the Order Paper for this week after actually coming back in September. What changes are going to be—have been made from that September date?

PM: We'll be sharing some of those details this week, but as we've always said, that legislation will pass and it'll pass with the support of the coalition.

Media: Have you been briefed on the shooting in Darfield?

PM: Not extensively. I have some of the details, though.

Media: Do you stand by—or, do you back the police's actions in shooting—

PM: Again, I received information in the immediate aftermath. I imagine now that, probably, more details have come to pass, so I'd be loath to give too much comment on that without receiving a more fulsome briefing. But I do get a heads-up when there are significant incidents like that.

Media: I just have a question about the tax working group. A member, Robin Oliver, has said that the group's struggling to reach consensus on capital gains tax. Does that concern you—that the group might get to the point where it can't reach a consensus, and it goes through this big process and then can't reach a consensus, so it doesn't make solid recommendations?

PM: No. Look, I imagine that they'll still—regardless, a report will be produced and I'm sure that will be of use to the Government. But no, that doesn't concern me.

Media: What did you make of Simon Bridges' comments that he said that he would repeal any capital gains tax?

PM: Oh, look, that doesn't surprise me, but it's also hypothetical: we haven't done anything yet. On his statements more generally around the cost of living, he fails to take into account that this is a Government that has increased the minimum wage; that has overseen significant increases in wages, some of which amongst our lowest-paid workers; that has put in place a winter energy payment; that put in place the Working for Families tax credit increases that will benefit over 380,000 families; and increased paid parental leave. I think our work to improve the wages of those on the lowest and middle incomes has been significant. I see no suggestion from the Leader of the Opposition of how he would match those kinds of increases.

Media: On CGT, Grant Robertson's letter to the group following the initial report a couple of months ago seemed to strongly indicate that he preferred one of the two taxes on capital

income to be included in the final report. So it would seem to me that it would be disappointing to the Government if neither of those two options was eventually recommended.

PM: Oh, look, yeah, and we've got to let the process run its course. There is a little bit more time to be had, so I don't want to pre-empt the final conclusions that that working group will reach. We need to let them do their job.

Media: Of all the many taxes included in that report, those two taxes were singled out for discussion in that letter, so surely it would be disappointing if one of them didn't make it into the final—

PM: No, I'm not going to draw a conclusion from that, because, equally, it would be hypothetical to say that they wouldn't reach that consensus. We need to let them do their job, and, yes, I'm sure that there'll be robust conversation amongst themselves as they undertake writing the report as well. I'd expect no less; it's a diverse group, and we put together a diverse group so it could capture a range of views. Excuse me, everyone, I have to grab a plane. So—last question.

Media: Have you been briefed on the Eight Rivers project, and do you have a view as to whether hydrogen-produced natural gas could be part of a just transition—

PM: Around hydrogen?

Media: Yep.

PM: Ah, well, certainly—I'll give a general, if I may, a general perspective on hydrogen. We have, through the Provincial Growth Fund, supported some work around hydrogen—I believe they're Taranaki-based—and we're also amongst the first to have a joint venture with Japan in the central North Island around hydrogen as well. I think there's a huge amount of potential in hydrogen—something that Minister Woods is very enthusiastic about. But there's a bit more work for us to do, but we as a whole, I think, are demonstrating our support for that work to be done. All right; thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference