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NEW ZEALAND

Covid 19 coronavirus: Northland community case a 56yo woman; 'too early' for call on response

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Dr Ashley Bloomfield and Hon. Chris Hipkins update on the latest about a probably COVID-19 case in the community in Northland.

NZ Herald



KEY POINTS:

- * The new case of Covid-19 in the community is a 56-year-old woman.
- * She travelled to Spain and the Netherlands late last year before returning to NZ on December 30.
- * She went through MIQ at Auckland's Pullman Hotel and was released on January 13 after testing negative.
- * She then travelled around the southern part of Northland, to about 30 different locations in areas around Mangawhai, Dargaville and Helensville, and became symptomatic on January 15.
- * The strain is unknown but officials are acting on the assumption it is one of the new, more transmissible strains.
- * She has four close contacts who have been tested and are isolating.
- * Officials say it is 'too early' to speculate on any further response.

A 56-year-old woman visited 30 locations around southern Northland including cafes, restaurants and tourist attractions before developing symptoms and testing positive for Covid-19.

Officials are scrambling to contact trace the woman's movements and notify anyone who may have come into contact with her.

Four close contacts have already been identified and put into isolation.

The woman has not been sent to a Government-run quarantine centre but is instead self-isolating at her Northland home.

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins and Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield gave details about the community case at a press conference at the Beehive this afternoon.

The woman arrived from London on December 30 and stayed at the Pullman Hotel MIQ facility in Auckland. The origin of the infection is not yet known and the strain is unknown.

It was too early to consider the response to the case, Hipkins said.

The woman tested negative twice during her stay in MIQ before she was released.

She did not have symptoms in MIQ. She left MIQ on January 13 and returned to her home just south of Whangarei.



A testing station tent at Pohe Island carpark in central Whangarei. Photo / Michael Cunningham

Bloomfield said the person travelled in Spain and the Netherlands before arriving in New Zealand.

She had been to about 30 different locations in recent days, including areas around Mangawhai, Dargaville and Helensville.

She had four close contacts - both household contacts and some retail contacts. Her household contacts were being isolated and tested.

She had been to cafes, restaurants, retail outlets and some Airbnb accommodations.

Businesses the woman visited were being contacted as soon as possible, but some were not open today.

The woman had not been to any large events such as concerts.

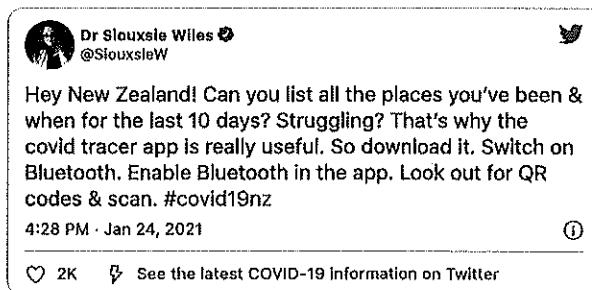
Ministry officials were contacting the places she had been and would put information on its website as soon as those places were notified.

"We are asking people who have been at those locations to stay at home and call Healthline for information on when to get a test."

The woman felt very mild symptoms on January 15. She did not associate those symptoms with Covid, but once they worsened she got a test. The result came back late last night.

The woman was currently at home, and did not need hospital care.

The woman was "assiduous in using the Covid tracer app", Bloomfield said.



If anyone was symptomatic, wherever they are in New Zealand, they should get tested, Bloomfield said.

Hipkins said in Northland, anybody who got a push notification should get a test, especially if symptomatic.

'I think urgency trumps some of the other concerns' - Reti

National's health spokesperson and Whangarei-based list MP Shane Reti said there was a sense of disbelief amongst the community and he was now calling on the government to act urgently.

He was very disappointed the 30 sites the woman who had tested positive for Covid-19 visited - which includes cafes, retail and Air BnBs - had not already been revealed and disagreed with the government's decision to drip feed the locations.

The net needed to be cast wide and quickly to contain the spread, he said.

"In matters of urgency like this and on a weekend - so you are not going to maybe get people until Monday in their business hours - I think urgency trumps some of the other concerns.

"And I think if you speak to some of the other business people they would say I'm OK with you getting out to my customers so we can keep them safe as well. I think that's disappointing. I think we need to reflect on that really soon on whether we should just be putting up all the locations as we understand them so we can get the best response possible."

Reti was also concerned the public had not been told where the positive test had been carried out and expected any close contacts to be tested as quickly as possible. He would have also liked some more detail around exactly how far north and south the woman had travelled.

"I think there's a range of things we need to step up to very very quickly and I would suggest that with the DHB you get a very comprehensive mass surveillance programme out and around, I suggest we use saliva testing, I think we should release those locations as soon as possible, I disagree with the drip feed roll out and I think if you spoke to most of the business owners they would also agree to get this information out there so we can cast our net as quickly and as wide as we possibly need to."

Hipkins said extra testing stations were going into Northland, especially around Mangawhai.

Richard, 75, from Kerikeri was one of the first dozen people to get a test at the Kamo testing site and said he did so because he saw the news on TV about the latest Covid case. He said he hadn't been to Dargaville or Mangawhai recently but thought it was still worth getting a test.

Kaipara mayor Jason Smith called on the Government to set up more Covid testing stations across his district rather than having people travel up to an hour to get tested in Whangarei.

He applauded the Northlander who tested positive for using the QR tracer app and switching on the bluetooth. "This is a huge wake-up call for people not to be complacent about the use of QR tracer app. I am concerned for the community but at this point, following health advice is the key."

Northland tourism leader Jeroen Jongejans said a positive Covid case in Northland was "highly concerning", especially at a time when the tourism sector was bouncing back after the lockdown.

"If we face another lockdown, some businesses will fall over the edge because we haven't quite hit summer yet. The tourism industry has suffered more than any other industry and the trick now is to track down places where this lady has been to and test people there."

Hipkins said MBIE was reviewing the CCTV footage at the Pullman, and contacting all returnees from the hotel since January 1.

Those people were asked to get a test and stay home until they had a result. It involves about 600 people.

Staff were also being asked to get a test if they had not had one in the last few days.

Bloomfield said contact tracing started about 48 hours before the woman became symptomatic.

Between 12 and 14 other travellers had been tested as positive with Covid-19 during the period the community case was in MIQ. A number of those had been the UK or South Africa variants.

Hipkins said the advice was that it was not necessary to have extra testing in MIQ.

As well as the day 3 and 12 tests, others at more risk were tested more frequently and there were follow-up calls.

To reports of runs on supermarkets, Hipkins said there was no need to panic. He said he was not foreshadowing any alert level changes, but if there was one supermarkets had always been able to restock quickly.

Whangarei mayor Sheryl Mai is urging people to be calm and follow advice from health officials.

She said people must stop panicking by rushing to supermarkets and buying up large.

"I've been impressed with the response of the health teams across the board and a good thing is the woman has done absolutely the right thing."

'A waiting game'

Covid-19 modeller Professor Michael Plank felt this case was different from the August Auckland cluster, given authorities were dealing with just one case with a probable link to the border - rather than several ones with no connection.

Plank said it was also encouraging that there were only four probable close contacts involved - and that the case had been using the NZ Covid Tracer app with Bluetooth activated.

"That all matters when it comes to how early we catch it," he said.

"But it's a little bit of a waiting game to get the results from testing of close contacts - that's the key thing at this stage - and once we get those test results, we'll know whether it's spread more widely."

Data expert Dr Andrew Chen says while it's encouraging the suspected case was actively using the NZ Covid Tracer app with its Bluetooth function on - whether those around her also were was another question.

Chen said the latest case was another clear example of why all Kiwis need to be using the app religiously.

"A person with Covid-19 may not show any symptoms for a few days, but they could be contagious in that time.

"We have a case who may have been in the community for 10 days already for example.

"You can't just wait for the outbreak and then start scanning, you need to be scanning as a preventative measure in advance of any cases being detected in the community.

"They did the right thing - they scanned their QR codes and they had Bluetooth Tracing on."

That meant the Ministry of Health could identify locations of interest quickly, and potentially alert other people who have been exposed quickly too.

"But for all of us to benefit from the use of this technology, we need as many people participating as possible.

"You can't be alerted via digital means if you aren't participating, and while manual contact tracing is still good and will probably get to you, it may be slower.

"Speed is of the essence in combatting this disease. If you are showing symptoms, get a test and don't go to work.

"If you have no symptoms, wash your hands, wear a mask when you can, and keep records of where you have been and who you have been near - preferably with NZ Covid Tracer and Bluetooth Tracing."

Govt delay in revealing locations reckless - David Seymour

Act Party leader David Seymour said the Government's delay in revealing the 30 locations the woman had visited was "reckless and risks making a dangerous situation much worse".

"How can people self-isolate and get tested in a timely manner if the Government won't tell them they've been somewhere they may have contracted the virus?"

"People want to take personal responsibility at times like this but the Government needs to be transparent and treat them like adults."

Seymour said the potential for the virus to have spread since the woman had tested positive was a huge concern.

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"Given how busy and mobile New Zealanders are at this time of year it's possible the virus has spread a long way.

"We hope that's not the case. In the meantime something must be done to get app use up or the risk of further lockdowns is very real."

The last case of community transmission in New Zealand was on November 18.

Earlier today the Ministry of Health reported that there had been eight new Covid cases in managed isolation since Friday.

Two of the cases came from South Africa, two came from the US, as well as a case each from the UK, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia and India.

Four travelled via UAE and Malaysia.