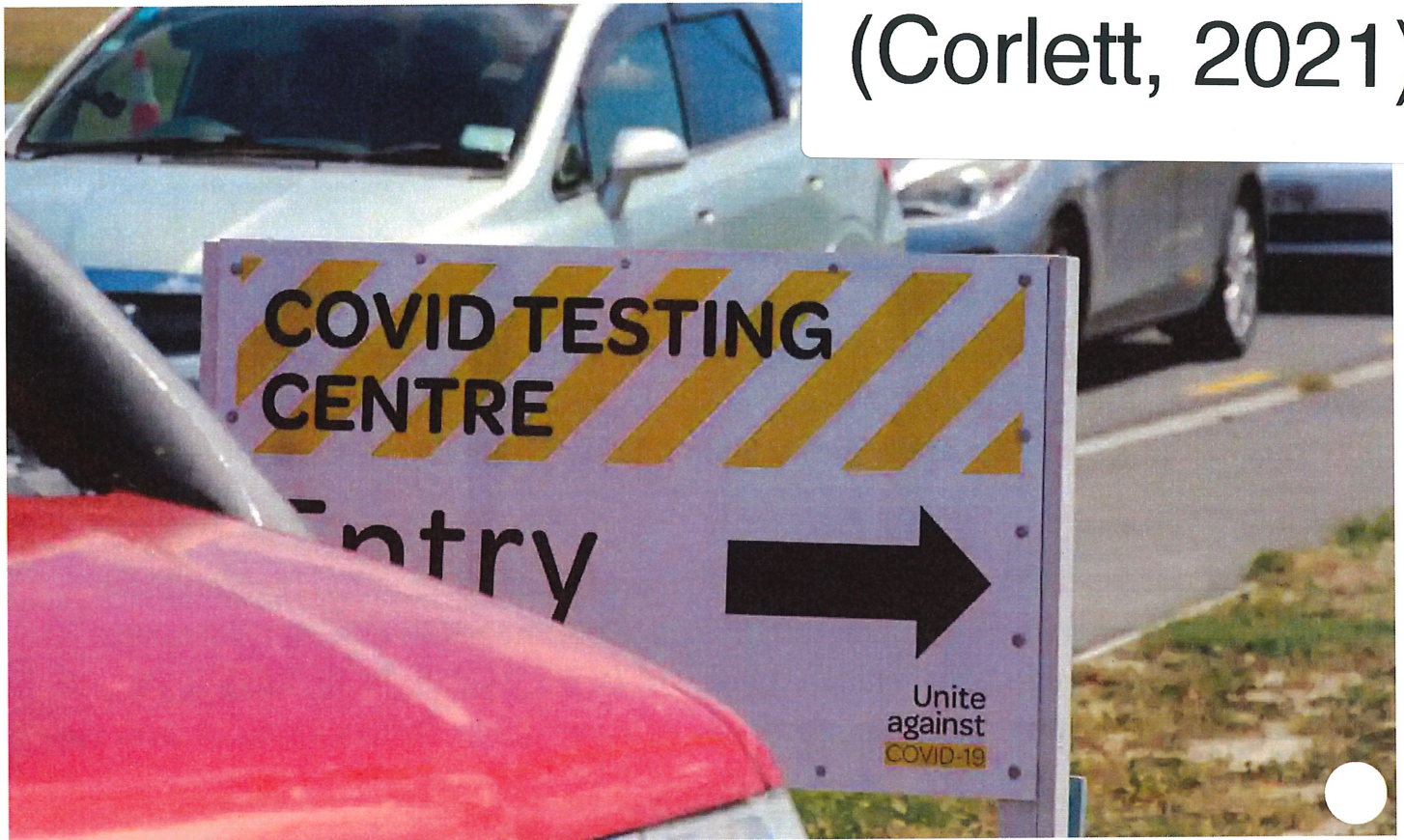


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New Zealand

Death of child with Covid-19 prompts calls for Māori to be prioritised in NZ vaccine rollout

Māori boy who died last week was youngest New Zealander to die with virus and the first child

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Eva Corlett in Wellington

@evacorlett

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The first death of a child with Covid-19 in New Zealand has prompted calls for Māori children to be prioritised in the next stage of the vaccine rollout, as the country grapples with **racial inequalities** compounded by the pandemic.

A Māori boy, under the age of 10 and who had tested positive for the virus, died last week, becoming the youngest New Zealander to die with Covid, the Ministry of Health confirmed. It is unclear whether Covid-19 was the cause of the boy's death, as **New Zealand** records all deaths of people considered active Covid cases in its official count. It is the country's 49th death of a Covid-positive person since the start of the pandemic. **Māori make up an estimated 17.1% of the population but they have accounted for 32% of all Covid-19 related deaths.**

New Zealand has hit its 90% double vaccination milestone for the eligible population (those 12 years and older), making it one of the most vaccinated countries in the world, but the rates for **Māori** and Pasifika are yet to catch up. According to the Ministry of Health, 77% of Māori are double vaccinated, and 88% of Pasifika. Combined, these groups have made up 75% of Covid cases.

The government has **faced criticism** for not prioritising Māori and Pasifika in its vaccine rollout, and for failing to adequately consult Māori over accessing hard-to-reach groups. But with provisional approval granted for children aged 5-11 years to be vaccinated, now is the opportunity to do right by those communities, health experts say.

“We must not repeat the failures that led to the existing vaccination inequities for Māori, inequities that are not a matter of chance but the result of structural racism and inequity by design,” six health experts - Dr Owen Sinclair, Dr Jin Russell, Dr Danny de Lore, Dr Erik Anderson, Dr Teuila Percival and Dr Siouxsie Wiles - wrote in **an editorial**.

The group said the government’s rollout for the adult population focused too heavily on age and pre-existing conditions, failing to take into account the younger age structure of the Māori population, the greater burden of Māori disease, the significant barriers for Māori accessing healthcare and their justified distrust of the health system.

According to the 2018 census, 32% of Māori are under 15 years of age, compared with 19.6% of the total population. Because of this younger age structure, fewer Māori are currently eligible for vaccination.

Russell, a developmental paediatrician, said Māori health and community leaders had advocated for strategies to prevent inequities since the start of the pandemic and now it was critical to listen to them.

“These are the people who understand the communities best. They’re on the ground, they know how to reach families.”

Māori children carry a higher burden of pre-existing conditions including diabetes, respiratory conditions, and obesity, she said. “If you design a vaccine rollout that doesn’t specifically reach those families who are hardest to reach, you will inevitably end up with an inequitable vaccine rollout.”

In the week leading up to Friday, there were over 280 Covid cases in children nine years and under. Russell said the vast majority of children do not become unwell but there is some evidence that the Omicron variant is

reproducing more efficiently in younger age groups, which poses an ongoing risk to the health of Māori communities.

Significant resourcing must go towards Māori community and health organisations before the rollout begins, Russell said, adding that one of the best approaches would be to enable vaccinations at schools.

“It’s really important for families to know that their child won’t be vaccinated without their explicit consent, but by making vaccines available at schools this enables everyone to reach the vaccine easily,” Russell said.

New Zealand has so far reported 13,125 Covid cases since the start of the pandemic, with 10,289 of those from the current outbreak. Weekly case numbers are beginning to trend downwards as the country’s vaccination rates continue to climb and public health measures prevent unvaccinated people from attending some venues, or gathering in large groups.

On Monday, the country reported its second probable death related to an extremely rare reaction to the vaccine. The Covid-19 vaccine independent safety monitoring board said a 26-year-old man died within two weeks of his first dose of the Pfizer vaccine and a post-mortem has identified myocarditis as the probable cause of death. The man developed symptoms in the days following his vaccine but did not seek treatment.

The board noted that Covid-19 infection can itself be a cause of myocarditis, as well as other serious illnesses, and it remains safer to be vaccinated.

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