

Covid 19 coronavirus: Pandemic pressure at MIQ facilities creates military-civilian culture clash

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(Fisher, 2021)

MIQ head Brigadier Jim Bliss and director general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield arriving for a briefing at the Ministry of Health in March 2021. Photo / Mark Mitchell



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A culture clash between our military and civilian agencies has emerged in the fight against Covid-19.

The degree of difference is such as to suggest the military really is from Mars - and sees everyone else as from a completely different planet.

Documents show the meeting of the two worlds confounded our military which has been the staffing backbone of Managed Isolation and Quarantine facilities.

One former non-commissioned officer said it was a near-perfect illustration of military confusion when encountering a civilian world. "There's nothing wrong with (civilians)," he said. "They're just different."

The issues were noticed in a series of reviews carried out into NZ Defence Force's contribution to running New Zealand's 30-plus MIQ facilities, which it called Operation Protect. The reviews provided frequent opportunities to review processes and to identify issues so as to constantly improve and provide the best contribution possible.

It identified ongoing issues with the military's ability to mesh with the civilian agencies also involved stopping Covid-19 from gaining a foothold inside New Zealand. One review from early in the effort saying "procedures and policies were lacking" for interaction with "OGAs" - other government agencies.

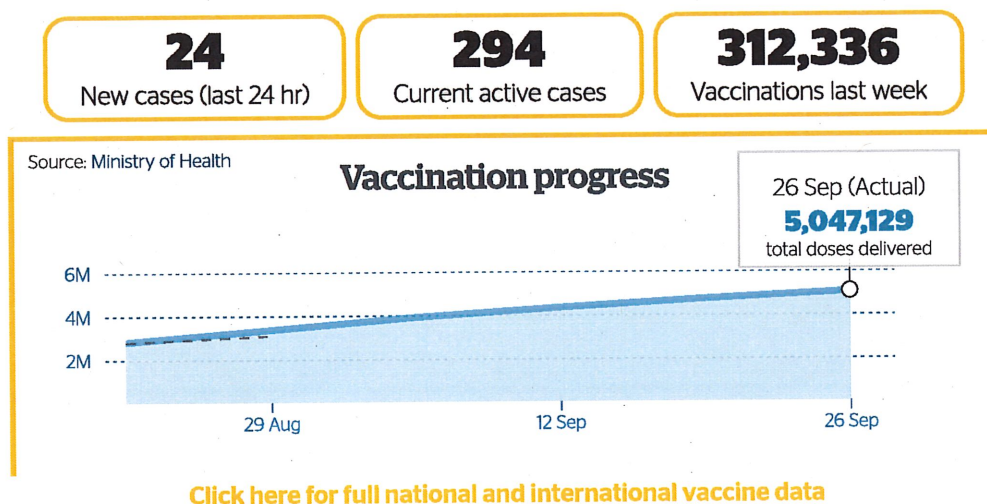
One of the three Operation Protect commands across New Zealand had "adopted land-based warfare doctrine that is not well suited to a domestic operation". It was recommended national "SOPs" - standard operating procedures be reviewed.

The military's love of acronyms was just one part of a huge culture difference. NZ Army veteran Aaron Wood, who left NZDF as a Staff Sergeant, said language was a significant and clear marker of the difference.

"You're talking about an organisation that has a different culture and a different language to the civilian world."

Wood, who did a master's thesis on military personnel reintegrating into the civilian world, said clarity and speed in communication was a pathway to being rapidly effective to the extent that daily pleasantries were trained out of soldiers.

NZ VACCINE TRACKER



"On basic training one of the first things you learn is don't say 'please' and don't say 'thank you'. Everything is about brevity."

The review documents show early reports from military personnel that "AoG civilians found it difficult to integrate into the 'military way' and lexicon". The reviewers stated that "in reality NZDF personnel should be integrating into the AoG response using the CIMS (Co-ordinated Incident Management System) model".

It was a recommendation hampered by the lack of such a system, with reviewers finding "the RNZAF (Royal NZ Air Force) have a structured CIMS training programme" but "NZA (NZ Army) and RNZN (Royal NZ Navy) have no training regime".

Other culture clash issues to emerge included the difference between the military approach of ordering subordinate personnel to do tasks and the civilian approach. Reviewers found: "Interaction with civilians is conducted in a very different fashion as they are not under the authority of the military to undertake certain actions."

Instead, reviewers found, work in MIQ facilities "demonstrated the importance of interpersonal and communications skills and the task is very much personality driven rather than a traditional hierarchy".

It was complicated further with a lack of familiarity with rank and uniform which were instantly recognisable in the forces and dictated behaviour and response.

The military reviewers found "the general population cannot identify between Army or Navy let alone the rank structure". It meant the "traditional ranks structure" worked in a military environment but not in a civilian world "where alternative talents are required to achieve the mission".

One review noted "senior personnel do not have such honed skills in comparison to some more junior ranks and that too much reliance is made on rank rather than leadership competency skills".

The "lessons learned" was that the initial headquarters push to have someone at the rank of Major lead a MIQ facility had been dropped, opening the role up to lower ranks and senior NCOs.

It found the manager's position was "personality based and not tied to rank". "Isolated guests recognise the uniform and the subsequent interpersonal skills of our people and not the rank which hasn't made a large impact."

Wood said the difference could be illustrated as that between an iPhone and an Android - "they do the same thing but their operating systems are very different". "It's a tribal-based culture whereas today's society is far more a dignity culture."

Wood said the military trained its personnel to operate in a particular way and it was very difficult to revert to civilian life. Wood, speaking as a former NCO, said it could be particularly so with officers, who were elevated and isolated away from troops.

"You got to your mess and you're eating on china with silver."

It could lead military personnel to forgetting the place they occupied in a democratic society. "The tribe doesn't exist in an isolation - it is subjugated to civilian leadership."

Wood said NCOs spent their careers leading subordinates while officers might do so for periods of their careers - through NCOs - before being posted to roles where they gained little leadership experience.

"Leadership isn't just about going and doing some courses. A lot of it comes from your character and your experiences."

It was a similar point made in the NZDF review documents, which pointed to the NZDPP (NZ Defence Doctrine) in which it "articulates its philosophical approach to the conduct of military operations".

The doctrine offers a trinity for leaders, the peak of which is the skill of "leadership" itself, above "command" and "management".