

Kate MacNamara: New Zealand's vaccine buying and the PR spend that shaped what we know

2 Nov, 2021 05:00 AM

(MacNamara, 2021)

Auckland and Waikato are set to see an easing of Covid-19 restrictions, moving to level three step two. Video / Dean Purcell / Mark Mitchell / Jason Oxenham / Alex Burton



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OPINION:

It turns out New Zealand's vaccine taskforce had two important jobs last year. The group was to buy enough doses of emerging vaccines to inoculate the population against Covid-19. And it was also to help compose and promote a favourable narrative about those purchases.

The taskforce itself was created in May 2020, but only in August did the Cabinet give the group, led by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), the money and the mandate to begin negotiating with international pharmaceutical companies. At that point, most of the countries to which we typically compare ourselves had already begun their advance buying.

Ultimately, a negotiating team led by Bell Gully lawyers hashed out four agreements to buy vaccine candidates for New Zealand, inked between October and December of last year.

This was good news after the slow, unfunded winter months in which the taskforce focused on other efforts, including multi-lateral buying that ultimately fell short and developing domestic vaccine manufacturing capability that never came to fruition.

Along the way, the public was fed a soothing version of events shaped by outside PR help, the funds for which the Cabinet signed off in May.

Karl Ferguson, a full-time public relations specialist and serial government contractor, through his firm, Arkus Communications, was paid some \$133,600 to work with the taskforce, for what MBIE describes as four months of full-time work (contacted by the Herald, Ferguson declined to comment on the work). It bears noting that it wasn't until August 10 that Cabinet funded Belly Gully negotiators and any actual vaccine purchasing.

What the Government got from Ferguson was communications that controlled and shaped the flow of information around vaccine procurement. Some of the work entailed co-ordinating the public relations teams across different government agencies, and some of it involved gauging the public's appetite for vaccines and promoting their ultimate use.

But Ferguson's work also created Ministers' messaging, and helped to time and promote it in politicised ways, both through the media and through commentators in wider civil society. Its ultimate effect was to achieve a singular and flattering version of events. It is a picture that emerges from a range of government documents, primarily MBIE's weekly report for the vaccine strategy, sent to Ministers, and released under the provisions of the Official Information Act.



The report for September 11 notes that Ferguson was even working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAT) in order to alert Ministers and officials of developments abroad - likely the signing of advance purchase agreements for vaccines - that might prompt pointed questions about why New Zealand had none at the time.

"We are working with MFAT to proactively capture [vaccine] information from posts [embassies and consulates] on announcements which may have an impact on New Zealand, in particular, Australia."

This information, the report notes, "will allow us to respond proactively, such as developing key messages, briefing stakeholders etc when required".

The sensitivity was almost undoubtedly driven by New Zealand's place behind most of its peers in negotiating bi-lateral vaccine agreements.

Starting in May, and picking up pace in June, July and August, the EU and dozens of countries - including the US, UK, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Japan and South Korea - had inked such agreements with pharmaceutical companies with promising vaccines. By September, New Zealand was starting to look like a laggard.

Ferguson's work also encompassed considerable "media management". In MBIE's weekly report of October 23, it's noted: "we are proactively contacting journalists who have shown an interest in the Covid-19 vaccine strategy, to ensure visibility of the Taskforce's role in the vaccine procurement process."

And following the news of the first advance purchase agreement with Pfizer, Ferguson's update tallies the widespread and positive media coverage received: "52 mentions in media articles".

There were also efforts to shape otherwise independent commentary: "We worked closely with Taskforce agencies on key communications collateral to support the Pfizer announcement...key stakeholders - especially those likely to be approached by media for comment - were provided with a 'heads up' prior to the announcements going out. A number of these stakeholders have provided positive public comment as a result."

These "stakeholders" likely included both Michael Baker, an epidemiologist at Otago University and Siouxsie Wiles, a microbiologist at the University of Auckland.

Another report (of December 17) notes: "we will again brief the 'COVID commentators' this week (Michael Baker, Siouxsie Wiles etc) on progress to secure the vaccine portfolio..."

MBIE declined to release the full list of "commentators" who were given these advance briefings. A spokesperson said the information would need to be requested under the provisions of the OIA.

To be clear, specialists like Baker have frequently provided advice to the Government and to officials in areas of the Covid response, typically in obvious and transparent ways. And they often have inside knowledge of government work.

What is surprising here, and ill-advised, is the opaque endeavour to draw the independent voices of civil society, and particularly of academia, so close to the mechanism of Government spin. After all, Ferguson was also feeding "key messages" and "reactive Q&As" to Ministers. And the information he dispensed carefully side-stepped issues like Cabinet's late appropriation of funds for vaccine purchases, one consequence of which was that Pfizer was left waiting more than six weeks through July and August for a first meeting with officials.

The timing of vaccine announcements also entailed considerable, and clearly political choreography, all of it aided by Ferguson who co-ordinated with pharmaceutical companies and others both the details and schedule of information released.

The agreement with Pfizer was signed on October 6, and that news was held for six days, and released by Ministers Chris Hipkins and Megan Woods on October 12, the Monday of the election week.

The timing looks heavily strategic, in that it delivered an important piece of good news at a critical moment for the Government. Hipkins' office denied that politics played any part, a spokesman explained: "it can just take time to arrange everything and is the way announcements can sometimes work out." But funnily enough once the election was clinched and the new Government (the product of a landslide victory for Labour) had a second vaccine purchase to announce, it managed to get the news out the door in record time.

Vaccination progress

DHB	Population	First dose	First dose %	Second dose	Second dose %
Northland	161,320	142,077	88.1%	133,231	82.6%
Waitematā	526,087	499,743	95.0%	486,695	92.5%
Auckland	423,958	413,917	97.6%	403,732	95.2%
Counties Manukau	482,773	455,135	94.3%	438,370	90.8%
Waikato	357,176	332,981	93.2%	317,332	88.8%
Lakes	94,419	86,308	91.4%	80,890	85.7%
Bay of Plenty	216,941	201,393	92.8%	189,509	87.4%
Tairāwhiti	41,965	37,969	90.5%	35,149	83.8%
Taranaki	102,147	94,580	92.6%	89,459	87.6%
Hawke's Bay	145,571	136,934	94.1%	129,024	88.6%
MidCentral	152,302	144,266	94.7%	137,066	90.0%
Whanganui	57,247	51,631	90.2%	48,555	84.8%
Capital and Coast	271,174	263,537	97.2%	256,213	94.5%
Hutt Valley	130,239	124,025	95.2%	118,955	91.3%
Wairarapa	41,427	39,223	94.7%	37,360	90.2%
Nelson Marlborough	135,743	128,203	94.4%	121,619	89.6%
West Coast	27,906	25,434	91.1%	23,872	85.5%
Canterbury	482,890	471,026	97.5%	453,873	94.0%
South Canterbury	52,584	49,099	93.4%	47,046	89.5%
Southern	288,015	276,973	96.2%	266,188	92.4%

Population figures are the Ministry of Health's Health Service User (HSU) population estimates.

The deal to buy Janssen's vaccine was inked on November 18; the announcement was made by Woods the following day.

But timing was important for the Government again when the final two vaccine purchases were signed in December.

By that point, international regulators had begun to approve vaccines under emergency provisions and early rollouts were under way in the US and the UK. There were concerns that New Zealand might be well back in the queue.

To create a sense of progress "Vaccine Day" was conceived for December 17. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, flanked by her key Covid-19 ministers - Andrew Little (Health), Woods (Research, Science and Innovation), Hipkins (Covid-19 Response) and others - would front a splashy media event at Auckland University.

The main news was that two additional vaccines had been ordered, totalling 15m courses and completing a full "vaccine portfolio" (a fifth is referenced in the documents but it appears it fell through).

A supply of Novavax was signed off two days before the big event, but the AstraZenica deal, completed on December 10, sat unmentioned for a full week.

MBIE's report for the week ending December 11 notes the finalised purchase: "we understand that the Prime Minister will announce these details on 17 December, as part of a wider vaccine announcement."

Ferguson's work to prepare the politicians for that day was considerable. His weekly update reads: "we continue to prepare communications collateral for the planned Vaccine Day...we are working with Minister's [sic] offices to coordinate key elements of this event, and will provide a draft media release, reactive Q&As, key messages, event briefing documents and speaking notes, as required. We have met with the communications and government relations contacts at relevant companies this week, to ensure we are coordinated in advance of planned announcements."

Vaccines have often been described as a trump card or a golden ticket in New Zealand's fight against Covid. That's apt. But the PR hustle and the political haymaking has also provided the sullied feel of a three-card trick.