

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins presented a vaccine roll-out plan that was millions of doses out of whack.

(Rodrigues, 2022)

Felippe Rodrigues • 05:00, Feb 12 2022



AARON WOOD/STUFF

Basically the data is now a muddle. We said it would be.

After almost a year of trying to hide an embarrassing error, the Ministry of Health was this week forced into revealing it presented a vaccine roll-out plan that was off by millions of doses. Data journalist Felippe Rodrigues explains.

It started with a graphic designer in front of a whiteboard. Their task: to sketch a line that would show how many New Zealanders would get their first and second doses of the Covid-19 vaccine at different times during 2021.

The designer looked at some actual data that existed on a website. They drew the lines. Those lines were put on to a document, labels were added and the logos of the New Zealand Government, the Ministry of Health and 'Unite Against Covid' stamped underneath.

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins introduced the document as a "graph" at the regular 1pm press conference on March 17, 2021. The labels outlined the number of doses to be given each week and the dates at which different groups of people would get them.

Hipkins described it as part of a process that had been "worked through very carefully".

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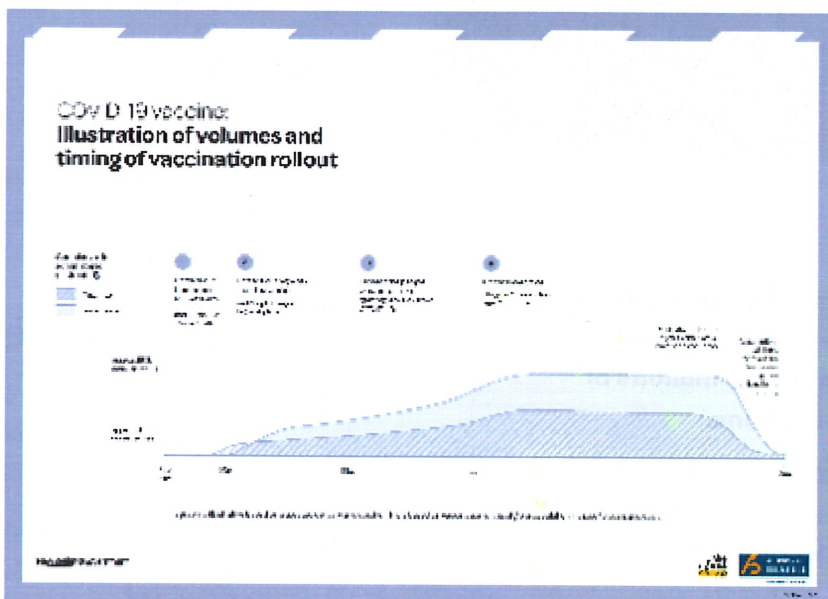
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At this stage, a mere 27,000 people in New Zealand had received at least one dose of the Pfizer vaccine. Many other countries were far ahead with their roll-outs. The clamour for information about when and how more doses would be given here was rising.

The chart – the one that was hand-drawn with reference to some sort of data on a website (we don't know exactly what) – was all we had to go on. The way Hipkins was describing it invited the impression this was a formally modelled plan.



MINISTRY OF HEALTH

The flawed graph released by the Ministry of Health on March 17, 2021

We quickly learned that it really wasn't. After media organisations, including *Stuff*, requested the data behind the chart, the Health Ministry back-tracked, describing it as an 'illustration' and refusing to release any data. Then things got weirder. Much, much weirder.

A couple of days later, National's Covid Response spokesman Christopher Bishop asked the same thing, this time via a written Parliamentary question: "Is there a spreadsheet (or spreadsheets) that underpin the data in the graph? ... If so, can it be supplied please?"

The truth was: no, there isn't any data, it was just a line on a whiteboard. Hipkins, though, didn't say that. Instead, he replied: "The graph that the Member is referring to is intended to be illustrative and approximate. The data that underpins it is dependent on a number of factors including delivery schedules, uptake and progression through the sequencing framework."

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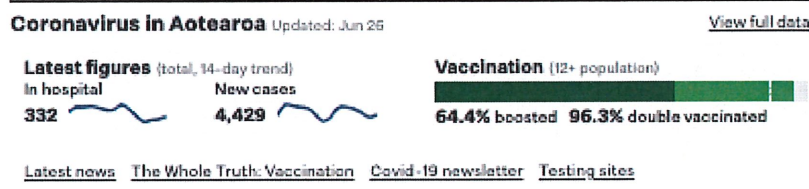
COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins and army Brigadier Jim Bliss, then-head of MIQ, during the March 17, 2021 1pm update.

A few days after that, on March 24, the ministry *did* reverse engineer some numbers. How do we know this? When our request for the data that we assumed sat behind the “graph” was declined, we appealed to the Ombudsman. It is, we argued, impossible to have a graph that displays the number of doses on one axis and the date on the other without data that matches the image. The Ombudsman, in a December 2021 ruling, basically agreed.

“Following preliminary inquiries, it [the Ministry] has explained that a graphic designer was essentially commissioned to draw the graph freehand on a whiteboard, based on other online data,” they said.

“The Ministry advised my Office that there was some data retrospectively created.”

But having now come up with some numbers, the ministry set about doing everything it could to keep them from the public.



In June 2021, RNZ revealed efforts from within the ministry to block any data associated with the chart from being made public. Emails from ministry officials discussed claiming the data was “commercially sensitive” or that it did not exist. Officials also raised concerns about the statistical validity of the data.

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Following the RNZ story, *Stuff* asked the ministry to reconsider its previous decision and release the information.

In a response a month later, the ministry stuck to the same boiler-plate response. "[The chart] was illustrative and did not have raw data behind it, but was developed through officials' understanding of roll-out campaigns, rather than any particular dataset," it said.

At this point, you might ask: Why were we so determined to see what was, by now, a pretty meaningless data set?



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felippe.d@stuff.co.nz

In the months we were waiting for the ministry to give up its fight to keep its numbers from the public, we did our own analysis of that hand-drawn line. By measuring pixels in the image and interpolating the values, we were able to see that it suggested there would be about 2.7 million more second doses given than first doses. Even with the naked eye, it was clear the chart had second doses starting *before* any first doses.

These don't seem like the kinds of errors you would associate with a planning process that had been "worked through very carefully", as Hipkins had claimed.

It perhaps also helps explain why the ministry was so determined to find ways of hiding its mistakes from the public.

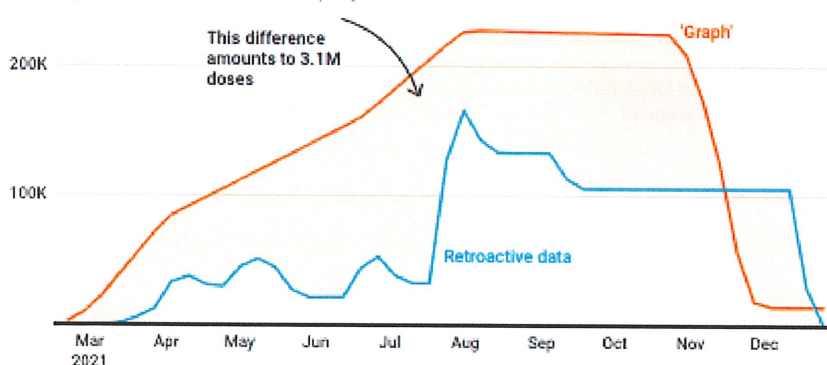
Bishop says it reflects a lack of transparency about various aspects of the pandemic response.

"One of the perennial problems over the last two years," he says, "has been failure to admit when they could have done better.

"The ministry needs to be able to say 'we got that one wrong.'"

The 'graph' was wrong by millions of doses

Weekly second doses in two projections created in March 2021



'Graph' line reconstructed by measuring curve pixels in the static graph published by the Ministry of Health on March 17, 2021

Chart: Felipe Rodrigues • Source: Ministry of Health, Stuff analysis

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In the end, the ministry was forced to surrender. In its December ruling, the Ombudsman's office said the ministry had acted unreasonably by refusing *Stuff*'s Official Information Act request when a dataset depicting the roll-out was held by the agency.

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This week, nearly a year after that pen made its decisive stroke across a ministry whiteboard, **Stuff received a spreadsheet – the retroactively-created data set.**

It shows, when compared to the data *Stuff* was able to reconstruct, **that the graph was incorrect by millions of doses.** This error was never officially corrected.

The ministry responded to a request for comment after this article had been published, after not meeting an earlier deadline.

National Immunisation Programme director Astrid Koornneef said the ministry accepted the Ombudsman's final opinion that it was unreasonable to decline *Stuff's* further requests for the data created retrospectively to match the freehand drawing once it did become available.

The ministry apologised for this, and Koornneef said the requested information has since been provided.

Koornneef acknowledged the ministry should have reconsidered the release of the data earlier.

"The ministry's data and reporting products have however undergone significant development and refinement since then, and continue to be refined over time in response to media and public interest. This includes ensuring all products meet the appropriate standards for statistical accuracy and robustness."

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