

Covid-19 Delta: Roche denies it took tests from business, but won't say where missing tests went

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February 8 2022 A million people due to get booster shots will begin receiving text message or email alerts from today, as PM Jacinda Ardern promised \$400,000 to rural communities in her post-Cabinet press conference.

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Two-thirds of rapid antigen tests (RATs) ordered by one distributor last month have yet to arrive.

The distributor, who does not wish to be named, was told to expect two orders of tests in January, before being told the tests had been requisitioned for Government stocks.

A fortnight ago, director general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield denied tests were being requisitioned, saying that only forward orders of tests not already in the country were being "consolidated" by the Government.

The Ministry of Health then admitted that some Roche tests already in the country had been taken by the Government, although not "delivery confirmed" tests.

Roche later said that it had not "requisitioned" any tests, but refused to answer where the missing tests actually ended up.

"No supplies destined for private customers were, or will be, diverted to fulfil Government orders," the company said.

"We supply in response to orders, and these are given to the customers as they arrive,"

Roche was first asked to explain what happened to the missing tests on January 26, nearly a fortnight ago. Roche did not say where they had gone when asked to explain again on Tuesday, but said they were not "requisitioned".

The company's denial came after the Ministry of Health clarified Bloomfield's earlier remarks that tests "consolidated" by the Ministry for the Government's stocks were not in New Zealand when they were allegedly taken.

The ministry said some Roche stocks were in the country.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said that the Ministry of Health was saying the Government "had an order with Roche and Roche have verified that and Roche does process those orders as they were received and the Ministry of Health were top among that queue and received their order".

"They were not allocations that were destined for any other company," Ardern said.

There was frustration from at least one firm that ordered rapid tests with the Government's assertion that it was getting tests first because it was the first to order them. The business noted that the ministry was reluctant to allow RATs to be used in New Zealand, effectively banning them.

Then, upon lifting the ban, it appeared to have jumped in front of the very businesses that were lobbying for their use.

National's Covid-19 spokesman Chris Bishop said the conflicting statements were an "utter mess".

"The ministry is saying one thing, Ministers saying another, and private businesses saying other things altogether," Bishop said.

He said the key thing was that businesses wanted tests for their staff and could not get them.

The statement from the ministry was in response to the question whether it stood by its statement "that it was only diverting tests as they came into New Zealand".

A spokeswoman replied the ministry "did not take any 'delivery confirmed' Roche orders from industry. However, we did take the full February allocation from Roche and their stock on hand in New Zealand as part of having our orders fulfilled by Roche."

The ministry's assertion it took the full February allocation from Roche, and Roche's assertion that no "supplies destined for private customers" have or will be taken by the Government suggests that no private businesses had Roche orders this month, and the total order was intended for the Government.

But at least one business has disputed this, although it did not wish to be named for fear of upsetting Roche and the ministry.

Roche later said that the tests that were "given" to the Government in January were "imported to meet specific orders from them".

In response to the question of why its customers believed they were getting tests in January, Roche said it "informed customers that the Government had requested we prioritise its order with future stock".

However, a "formal request" from the Government was "never made".

"Roche kits were not requisitioned or prioritised for the Government," the company said.

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said he was "not entirely sure what the Ministry of Health were meaning to suggest in that statement".

"The advice that they have consistently given us is that there's no requisitioning involved, that Roche in particular are fulfilling the orders in the order in which they received them and the Ministry of Health's order came in first," Hipkins said.

Act Party leader David Seymour called on the Government to release correspondence between itself and testing companies to clear up confusion.

"The Ministry of Health has said it 'did take the full February allocation from Roche and their stock on hand in New Zealand as part of having our orders fulfilled by Roche'.

"Jacinda Ardern said this morning on AM that was wrong. They can't both be right," Seymour said.

The ministry also said it had asked for the names of any companies that had been affected by the decision to "consolidate" tests. But Ardern later said no companies had their orders taken.

This is despite at least two businesses, Health Works and InScience, reporting their orders had been delayed indefinitely after the Government's "consolidation" order.

Speaking at the time the Government announced the "consolidation" policy, Health Works' director Clair Connor said Roche called her on the morning of January 26, saying their order of tests would not be coming.

"All that's happened this morning is we got a call from our big supply company Roche saying 'sorry, we know we said your order was going to come yesterday, but sadly there is no stock today'," she said.

She said the Government was "seizing the tests direct from the supply companies".

Roche was asked to give its version of the conversation it had with distributors like Health Works. It has yet to do so.