

Government to make changes to managed isolation facilities following 1 NEWS investigation

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FRI, JUN 12 • SOURCE: 1 NEWS

Hall, 2020

A 1 NEWS story has prompted changes in the way the Government handles travellers in isolation.

9 April
COVID timeline

Yesterday, 1 NEWS revealed groups from Auckland's Crowne Plaza Hotel were coming into close contact with the public. Source: 1 NEWS

Last night, 1 NEWS revealed recently returned Kiwis were mingling with others from different flights inside Auckland's Crowne Plaza hotel, and were coming into close contact with the public during daily guided walks.

Footage filmed by a Crowne Plaza guest showed a member of the public unwittingly joining a guided isolation walk, and people from different flights mingling in close quarters in the hotel smoking room.

Now, guests at more Auckland hotels have come forward with similar stories of lax management, and the Government said it would be making changes.

One man who stayed at Rydges in Auckland said guests from different flights were in "close proximity" to each other during isolation in areas like the lobby and smoking room.

"You could be on your fourteenth day and then you could be mingling with guests that had turned up the night before.

"On the guided walks, you would walk in a line and they would make us spread out multiple times. But when we were doing that members of the public would effectively join your line because they weren't aware you were an isolation group."

Mike Bush, leader of the Government's Covid-19 operational taskforce, said the call was made to review practices after he saw the footage from the Crowne Plaza.

"That's not good enough. We've got to keep those people safe ... We need to get that right."

Guided walks will be scrapped at all 15 of the Government-managed sites. Hotel guests will now only be able to exercise on hotel premises or be bussed to a safe area.

"Walking groups have gone. Some hotels can bus people to another location. For others we've found another location on site where people can ensure that they're not near any other members of the public."

Mr Bush said the Government is also reviewing practices inside the hotels.

"We will put a new practice in place to make sure people on day one don't mingle with people who have been there a lot longer. That is a difficult process.

"The smoking area, we're trying to make improvements there so we don't have people there from day one with people from day 12.

"Now we're in Alert Level 1, we will be having a new testing regime so people will be tested on day three and then on day 12."

National deputy leader Nikki Kaye said she was concerned about isolation breaches at hotels.

"It's not good enough. A lot of New Zealanders have worked so hard over this period, they've made huge sacrifices. People have been torn apart from their families, they've had freedoms restricted.

"To find out the Government hasn't provided stringent enough quarantine processes is gutting for a lot of people, and we expect better."

One man contacted 1 NEWS to say he was so concerned about issues at the Crowne Plaza when he was isolated there in early May, he wrote a 19-page report and sent it to Government officials and hotel management.

"I saw that something needed to be done, and I've run hotels and saw there was a bigger problem at hand.

"People on the outside don't understand what's happening on the inside.

"When I saw the news last night I was horrified to see the things I had highlighted back at the start of May were still happening. We are not going to stay Covid-free if we don't start sticking to these guidelines."

University of Otago epidemiologist and public health expert Michael Baker said he couldn't understand why recently arrived travellers weren't required to wear masks given the global pandemic was far from over.

"This is a situation where masks would definitely help, and certainly the modelling that we've done shows that face masks are very effective for this sort of disease."

He said although there isn't currently Covid-19 in New Zealand, the risk will heighten as cases increase in other countries and New Zealand begins to relax its borders.

"Globally, there's very little immunity, so basically it's as though it's just beginning in many areas.

"Unfortunately, if you just do a back-of-the-envelope calculation, this pandemic could kill 20 or 30 million people globally over the next two years."

The Government said more than 14,000 people passed through managed isolation so far, with about 3000 people in isolation facilities on any given day.

Mr Bush said the Government's Covid-19 response team is constantly reviewing policies, and that it is ultimately responsible for managing proper isolation at the 15 facilities.

"We work with the hotel staff but at the end of the day we are there as officials to make this happen. Hotels have been fantastic but the responsibility rests with us.

"Everyone has a right to be kept safe in this process, but we've got to allow New Zealanders to come back to the country. This is their right to be here. That's why we've got this system in place."

Got a story about a managed isolation facility? Email kristin.hall@tvnz.co.nz

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