(MOH, 2021aa)
[15 Apr 2021]

Border trial of app to detect COVID-19 early

Media release

15 April 2021

A trial is underway to see if an app connected to wearable smart devices can detect COVID-19 in border workers before they experience symptoms, says Shayne Hunter, Deputy Director-General of Data and Digital, Ministry of Health.

The Ministry of Health has organised a month-long trial of the ëlarm app, which connects to wearable devices such as Fitbit, Apple Watch and other smart watches or fitness trackers. The app uses artificial intelligence technology to inform users of early physiological changes that might indicate they are becoming unwell, several days before they experience symptoms.

Up to 500 border workers can volunteer to take part in the trial, which runs until early May. After installing the app on a smart device, they will receive regular email reminders, and alerts throughout the day and can securely view their own health information on the app or by going online to view a dashboard.

The app establishes a personalised health baseline for each user, based on their wearable data history. All data used by the app is entirely private to the individual participants, which is a fundamental part of ëlarm's privacy-by-design principles.

'Contact tracing is at the heart of our COVID-19 response and it's essential we find and treat people who might have been exposed to this difficult virus before it has a chance to take hold in our communities,' says Shayne Hunter.

'There's no single fix for COVID-19 so it's important we use the tools and technologies at our disposal to give contact tracers and health workers a good head start. We already have good tools such as the NZ COVID Tracer app and QR code posters, and the Ministry of Health is investigating other technologies that might provide further support for our contact tracing.

'If the ëlarm app lives up to its potential, it might provide early notification to our critical border workforce if they're becoming unwell. That means they can take appropriate action such as self-isolating and being tested for COVID-19.

'Even though our border workers are vaccinated, the reality is that some people will still feel unsure about the increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 from working on the border. We want to really support this essential work by giving people good tools to monitor their own health to keep themselves, their whānau and all of New Zealand safe and healthy.'

Datamine, the New Zealand company which developed the ëlarm app, will provide wearable devices for border workers taking part who do not have a Fitbit or smartwatch.

Early research of similar technology supports the use of wearable devices to detect COVID-19 and other transmissible diseases, including studies undertaken by Stanford University, Scripps Institute and UCSF. More information can be found on the ëlarm website (https://www.elarm.health).

© Ministry of Health – Manatū Hauora