MINISTRY OF HEALTH
MANATŪ HAUORA

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First Omicron case detected in New Zealand

Media release

16 December 2021

Whole genome sequencing has detected New Zealand's first case of the Omicron variant in a recent international arrival who tested positive in a day 0/1 test at a Christchurch managed isolation facility.

The case arrived in Auckland from Germany via Dubai on December 10 and flew to an MIQ in Christchurch on an aircraft chartered for international arrivals.

After testing positive, they were moved from the Crowne Plaza Managed Isolation facility to the Sudima Christchurch Airport dual-use Managed Isolation and Quarantine facility.

The case is fully vaccinated with two doses of the Pfizer vaccine.

Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield said that while the arrival of a new variant is concerning, New Zealand is well placed to manage Omicron cases.

'We knew it would be a case of when, not if, Omicron arrived on New Zealand's shores – our health and MIQ teams around the country have been planning for it.

'With a strong border, we are prepared to detect Omicron cases in international arrivals and manage them appropriately.

'Whole genome sequencing on every COVID-19 case detected at the border remains a critical element in our defence against COVID-19.

'We know how rapidly Omicron has spread globally, so it's been important to make sure every border case detected undergoes urgent genome sequencing.

'We have been doing everything we can to prepare for Omicron and to keep it out of the community since the variant was first identified.

'Our vaccine rollout remains our key defence against all variants of COVID-19, including Omicron. With 90% of the eligible population now double-dosed, and the booster programme underway, New Zealanders are well protected. We want vaccinations to continue increasing and ask everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated.'

Contact tracing is underway to identify passengers who were on the international and domestic flights with the case who has the Omicron variant.

As a precautionary measure, all passengers on the flights with the case are required to complete all ten days at a managed isolation facility – rather than spending the last three days of their isolation period in self-isolation.

Joint Head of MIQ, Chris Bunny, says the managed isolation facility is well set up to care for these people and protect the community.

'Managed Isolation and Quarantine takes the safety of workers and their families, whānau and broader communities very seriously.

'All Managed Isolation and Quarantine facilities follow strict infection prevention controls developed by the Ministry of Health to manage the risks of spreading COVID-19. The Ministry of Health's advice is to continue with our rigorous MIQ IPC protocols.

'At every MIQ facility returnees must remain physically distant from each other, and from staff members, at all times.

'At a quarantine facility, returnees cannot leave their room freely. They must stay in their room unless they have a medical appointment, are on their specified fresh air or smoking time or there is an emergency, such as a fire or an earthquake.

'Staff wear full PPE when escorting returnees to and from their rooms. Returnees are required to wear PPE in line with Ministry of Health guidelines while outside their room. Health staff conducting health checks wear full PPE (face shield, gown and gloves) and do not enter quarantine rooms.

The Sudima Christchurch Airport dual-use Managed Isolation and Quarantine facility has a very strict Infection Prevention and Control measures in place developed by the Ministry of Health to manage the risks of spreading COVID-19 – as do all MIQ facilities. The staff at these facilities are experienced in managing and caring for positive cases.

Any further information on the case and next steps will be made available tomorrow.

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