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BUSINESS

Matthew Hooton: Did health officials mislead PM and public on testing capability?

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Has the Ministry of Health been straight with the the Prime Minister and the public over what testing volumes were possible? Photo / Mark Mitchell

NZ Herald

OPINION:

When reported daily Covid infections passed 1000 last week, no one was surprised that the track and tracing system fell over. But no one except those working at the grassroots suspected the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing and processing capability would also be overwhelmed.

It appears in my view that, for at least two months, the Ministry of Health has been misleading both the Prime Minister and the public over what testing volumes were possible. The system became overloaded at just a third of what the ministry said it was prepared for.

In the first week of January, as Omicron overwhelmed New South Wales' testing capability, I asked the ministry how many tests could be taken and processed each day in New Zealand.

It replied that the system could already do 40,000 each day and that "work underway ensures this will increase to 60,000 a day in February".

In early February, medical specialists told me they believed this was laughable. In particular, they told me that even if 60,000 samples could be collected each day, there was no way that many could be processed in laboratories. They said in their view the system was already overloaded, with test results for conditions other than Covid also taking considerably longer than usual.

I went back to the ministry for clarification about both their sample collection and processing capability.

On 10 February, the ministry advised both me and more importantly the Prime Minister's office that "laboratory testing capacity is the same as laboratory processing capacity". It insisted that it had "recently boosted PCR testing processing capacity from 39,000 a day to 58,000, with the ability to surge to 77,600 tests where necessary for a seven-day period".

My friends in the medical professions again said they thought this was nonsense. It seems they were right, even though the Ministry of Health again stood by its numbers this morning.

On Friday, the Waikato District Health Board told its employees that, because so many samples were being submitted, "non-priority" test results may take up to a week. Even for "critical workers" it said results could take up to three days.

Consistent with media reports, the Ministry of Health itself complained on Friday that it was "continuing to experience high demand at Covid-19 testing sites … resulting in long waits at testing centres".

"Some Covid-19 test results are taking longer to process at laboratories due to an increase in demand at Community Testing Centres, particularly across the Auckland region," it said. "Some results are being returned within 48 hours, but others are taking longer."

This suggested that the ministry's 77,600-a-day surge capacity had been exceeded, or at least its 58,000-a-day base capacity.

In fact, on Friday the ministry reported it had done only 32,894 tests the previous day. This remains the highest number this month, but is still just 57 per cent of its claimed base capacity and a miserable 42 per cent of its claimed surge capacity. Daily tests fell back to around 27,500 over the weekend.

Through February, when the ministry says it can do at least 58,000 tests a day, daily testing has averaged 22,777. That's less than 40 per cent of what the ministry says is its base capacity and just 29 per cent of its purported surge capacity.

If you took at face value everything the ministry has said, you'd think there must be huge numbers of nurses and lab staff twiddling their thumbs, and that everyone would be getting PCR test results back the same day.

That they're not suggests the ministry's advice to the Prime Minister and the public about its testing capability was not just somewhat exaggerated but inflated around three-fold.

It explains in my view why the ministry is now rolling out at testing stations the rapid antigen tests (RATs) it spent a year maligning. And it is probably lucky the harshness of the old 24-day isolation rule – now down to 17 days – is deterring so many people from having tests.

A spokesperson for the ministry told me this morning that the lower reported numbers are because "laboratories are now unable to pool samples as the positivity rate has increased". I would have thought that the relevant people should have known this would be the case back in January, when the ministry first advised it could do around 60,000 tests a day this month.

The ministry seems to shrug off the long queues in Auckland last week, saying "queues at testing centres have been seen previously as large numbers of people seek testing".

It says processing delays "relate to the volume of samples in Auckland and Waikato, following a surge in people seeking testing there, combined with the switch from pooled to un-pooled samples".

In fact, the numbers are roughly what any reasonable person would expect. Including border workers and people in MIQ, only around half the tests taken each day have been in the Auckland, Counties Manukau and Waitemata district health board regions, and just 16,440 at the peak last week on Wednesday.

In my view the ministry must have anticipated such volumes in the greater Auckland region when advising the Prime Minister it could collect and process at least 58,000 across the country, and as many as 77,600 tests per day.

The ministry's numbers about hospitalisations and deaths also appear to me to be exaggerated, perhaps very significantly.

Yesterday's Covid-19 media statement says 116 people are in hospital, one is in ICU and two people have died over the last 24 hours. But its spokesperson told me the ministry is not currently able to break down hospitalisations between those who were admitted because of Covid-19 and those found to have Covid – perhaps asymptomatically – when admitted to hospital for other illnesses or injuries.

The spokesperson said the ministry is "developing a way to collect and report this data", something it ought to have done two years ago. It says it has one estimate that about three-quarters of reported hospitalisations are due to Covid-19 symptoms with the rest having Covid-19 incidentally.

It says this is similar to the proportions reported from a US hospital study published last week. This suggests current Covid-19 hospitalisations are more like 87, with another 29 people who have tested positive admitted for other reasons.

The ministry's data on Covid deaths is similarly unreliable. It confirmed this morning that it continues to record Robert Hart as a Covid death. In fact, Hart was shot and killed in New Lynn in November in a suspected homicide. How many of the ministry's reported Covid deaths are also unrelated to the virus is unknown.

With no functioning track-and-tracing system and an utterly overwhelmed testing system, the remaining defences against omicron are masks and vaccination boosters. The roll out of the latter continues to go well. But surely the justification for things like the 17-day isolation rule, MIQ at the border or even self-isolation of arrivals is wearing thin.

On the upside, the situation offers the Prime Minister an opportunity to reduce tensions with the parliamentary occupiers and others fed-up with current rules. The Prime Minister could announce today the end of both the Covid tracing system and testing rules for close contacts. It doesn't appear to me she can deliver either anyway.

What's more, it can't be long before vaccine mandates are a waste of time too. Once more than 95 per cent of us are boosted and omicron is rampant, how can it matter if some of those around us have chosen not to take advantage of the protection the vaccine offers?

The spread of the virus, not their lawlessness, seems set to very soon deliver the occupiers in Wellington and elsewhere everything they are asking for.