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Lack of Covid-19 leave a problem for health professionals, nurse says

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An Auckland nurse said nurses have been reluctant to test for Covid-19 and take time off work, for fear of running out of leave. Photo: 123RF

Nurses have been reluctant to test for Covid-19 and take time off work, due to fears of running out of sick leave, amid the latest influx of cases in early to mid-December, an Auckland nurse says.

The Covid-19 leave support scheme (<https://www.employment.govt.nz/fair-work-practices/covid-19-in-the-workplace#:~:text=Previous%20Leave%20Support%20Scheme,2020%20and%2015%20August%202023>), which helped employers pay employees who had to self-isolate due to the virus, ended in August 2023.

Communications sighted by RNZ indicated that at least one of the health districts in Auckland provided a Covid-19 paid special leave for staff after the scheme ended, however, that special coverage ended about six months ago.

Union delegate and Nurse Liandra Conradie, who spoke to RNZ in her capacity as a delegate, said there was an influx of Covid-19 in early to mid-December, which had a big impact on staffing.

Health New Zealand figures showed that daily cases in Auckland peaked at 109 in mid-December, but had been overall decreasing from then until the end of December - with 39 cases reported in Auckland as of 29 December.

Conradie said since her hospital stopped providing paid Covid-19 special leave, staff had been hesitant to use their sick leave or annual leave when they got symptoms.

"It has greater impact because some of the staff I work with have got children, and when our children get sick we take sick leave, so our sick leave gets depleted quite quickly,

"So when we then end up with Covid, that's five days of sick leave - that's half of our sick leave gone - and that kind of stops us from wanting to take Covid sick leave,

"And then we just come to work either feeling very crappy and unwell, and getting our patients in compromising positions, but also other staff members get that, and then there's more staff off, and having more staff off creates more other pressures," she said.

Many health staff were put in a tricky position, and had the mentality of "if I don't test, I don't have Covid, so I can still work", Conradie said.

She said while the Covid-19 cases had plateaued, she remained concerned that if the leave policy did not change, future outbreaks could spread faster, and more patients would be compromised by getting Covid-19 while in hospital.

"We need to be able to provide care to our patients ... but we also need to be safe in our own practice, and if we need time off, we need to be able to actually leave that desk," she said.

Conradie wanted to see the government revisit support options for health staff when they got Covid-19.

Health New Zealand said it was limited in the information it could provide in response due to staff being on leave during the holiday period.

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