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Covid inquiry phase two - Expert Reaction from Professor Michael Baker

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The Royal Commission on COVID-19 has outlined more lessons on "making the best decisions in the worst of circumstances". The report makes 24 formal recommendations, including: framing the elimination strategy as temporary, improving public health and economic modelling, limiting the use of urgency in lawmaking, keeping an eye on the research around social cohesion, and creating financial assistance scheme options ahead of the next crisis.

Professor Michael Baker, Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington comments:

"Aotearoa New Zealand has reached a key milestone in its pandemic preparedness with the release of the second and final Phase Two report of the NZ Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic response. This report examines government decisions from February 2021 to October 2022 and complements Phase One, which focused on the initial response in 2020–2021. Together they deliver extensive analysis and recommendations.

"This Phase Two report provides valuable insights on the important issues it was asked to focus on, notably vaccine safety and mandates, national and regional lockdowns, and procurement and distribution of testing and tracing technologies. Importantly, Phase Two supports the Phase One conclusions about the value of the elimination strategy as a critically important response to the most harmful pandemics. This second report has useful recommendations on the important issue of how NZ should plan for transitioning out of an elimination strategy if this response is needed in the future.

"The critical next step is the government's response, with responsibility sitting with the Minister of Health. This response is urgent given that modelling suggests a 20% chance of a Covid-scale pandemic each decade. A key priority is to establish highly strategic response mechanisms for assessing emerging pandemic threats and rapidly implementing an elimination (or ideally exclusion) strategy for the most severe pandemics, which requires rapid border closure. This strategic capacity needs to be supported by strengthening our pandemic response infrastructure which can be refined and tested by improving routine respiratory infection controls. It is important to consider how to ensure equity in future responses. Maintaining public engagement in all aspects of pandemic preparedness and response is vital and was a particular focus of the Phase Two report."

Conflict of interest statement: "No conflicts to declare."

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