

26th April 2022

Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern
Prime Minister

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Hon Andrew Little
Minister of Health

cc Associate Ministers Verrall, Henare
and Sio

By email: j.ardern@ministers.govt.nz c.hipkins@ministers.govt.nz a.little@ministers.govt.nz

Tēnā koutou Prime Minister and Ministers Hipkins and Little,

Thank you for the Government's dedicated and evidenced-based response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus far. We request that you urgently consider the following recommendations for the implementation of a strengthened **Vaccines Plus** mitigation strategy.

Executive Summary of Recommendations

- Implement and communicate a comprehensive **Vaccines Plus** mitigation strategy with the aim of maintaining low COVID-19 infection rates.
- Increase public education about airborne transmission.
- Recommend, and aid in the supply of N95-type masks for the public.
- Continue the school mask mandate over winter 2022.
- Supply CO2 monitoring and air filtration units to all school classrooms.
- Allow for alternative school learning arrangements during times of intense transmission.
- Produce updated expert ventilation and air quality guidelines for public indoor spaces.
- Continue to enable higher vaccination rates for children, and booster doses.

Vaccines Plus: to limit COVID-19 transmission

We the undersigned doctors and scientists, call on the New Zealand Government to adopt a comprehensive mitigation strategy, to minimise the negative health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This goal is best achieved by maintaining low COVID-19 transmission and infection rates through implementation of an evidence-informed **Vaccines Plus** strategy, that combines high vaccination coverage with effective public health and social measures.

COVID-19 is a novel pathogen that can repeatedly infect, with infection resulting in an increased risk of many serious long-term health complications for people of all ages. It is evident that vaccination alone will not be enough to fully protect our communities from high rates of COVID infection and the resulting complications.

Relying on 'personal responsibility', without effective public health measures, will result in repeated waves of infection, an overloaded and dysfunctional healthcare system, and ongoing disruption to daily life. This scenario is currently playing out around the world. Instead, a collective approach is required that focuses on minimising transmission by means of public health policies. These measures should be viewed as protections rather than restrictions, and when combined with a high vaccination rate, would encompass a **Vaccines Plus** strategy.

A public health based, **Vaccines Plus** approach favours the safety of all, especially marginalised communities who may lack access to resources needed to protect themselves. Groups particularly at risk when community transmission is high include children, the elderly, Māori and Pasifika, and people who are medically vulnerable or disabled.

Vaccines Plus: actions to take now

COVID-19 spreads predominantly by airborne transmission, therefore, to minimise infections public health policies must aim to provide clean air within indoor environments. The evidence for this conclusion is extensive.

To this end, we urge the New Zealand Government to implement the following, as part of a **Vaccines Plus** strategy:

- Define, and clearly communicate to the public, a coherent mitigation strategy with well-defined goals. It is essential that this strategy recognises that the best outcomes for individuals and society will be achieved by maintaining low infection rates.
- Increase public education on the nature and predominance of airborne transmission of COVID-19, including the factors that increase risk, and how to mitigate these risks.
- Identify appropriate high-quality masks for public use (currently N95/P2/KN95/KF94) and inform the public that these masks are greatly superior to surgical masks. Ensure procurement and funding to avoid inequity of supply, including to schools. **This policy must include the ongoing mandating of mask use in schools over the winter terms in 2022.**
- Strengthen school indoor air quality measures by supplying all classrooms with,
 1. CO2 monitoring to objectively assess the adequacy of ventilation, and
 2. Appropriately sized HEPA air filtration units in time for winter 2022, until such time as ventilation has been deemed adequate to prevent infection, by quantitative assessment.

- Provide alternative learning arrangements and community-based support for school-aged children when necessary, to protect them and their families during periods of intense transmission. New Zealand needs to adopt a whānau-centred approach that protects the well-being of children and their families in all settings.
- Engage engineers, aerosol scientists and other ventilation specialists to develop clear ventilation standards for indoor public spaces, including standards for air changes, airborne pathogen filtration and inactivation, and maximum acceptable CO2 levels.
- Continue to actively promote and enable high vaccination coverage for all groups of society, including children, who currently have low vaccination rates.

The implications of continuing to allow poorly-mitigated transmission of COVID-19 in New Zealand are too great to ignore. The burden of long term illness and disability on individuals, whānau, and our health system of Covid and Long COVID will include effects on the cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological, endocrine, and immune systems.

Recurrent waves of infection caused by waning immunity, new variants, and the premature removal of public health controls, would lead to an over-burdened healthcare system that would struggle to provide even standard services.

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease, but transmission is preventable. As previously outlined, there are inexpensive and highly effective strategies for suppressing infection rates, that will work in the background to keep people safe as they go about their daily lives. We believe these measures can create a 'covid-hostile' environment in New Zealand that would protect us not only from new variants, but also from other airborne respiratory infections.

In the face of high uncertainty about the future course and long-term impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, New Zealand can again be a world leader if we embrace a comprehensive public health based, **Vaccines Plus** strategy.

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| Dr Jennifer HY Lin | BPharm RegPharmNZ MPhil PhD | Medicinal & computational chemistry/Data science | |
| Dr Bradley Case | PhD | Ecology | AUT |
| Dr Alison Blaiklock | MPHTM FNZCPHM | Public Health Physician | |
| Dr Sharon Kletchko | FRACP | Quality and Risk, Governance and Compliance | |