

A Covid update: everyone's over Covid but Covid's not over us

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At the time of writing this Abstract (30 June 2022), 10-15 New Zealanders were dying every day with Covid and there were approximately 400 people in hospital. Neither death rates nor hospitalisations have shown any clear sign of falling over the past few months, demonstrating that the effective reproductive rate remains above 1.

Yet many New Zealanders are trying to convince themselves that the pandemic is over and even the Government is unnecessarily loosening up a range of restrictions, due to pressure from multiple sources. For example, on 2 July Border and Corrections workers will no longer be required to be vaccinated.

Trends worldwide remain very mixed. Death rates in Northern hemisphere countries are generally relatively low now that summer has arrived, but it seems unlikely that Covid is going away anytime soon. The most recent Omicron subvariants are quite distinct from the initial Omicron variants, with minimal cross-immunity and reinfection within a few months is being increasingly reported. Further, there has been a more rapid evolution of the virus since Omicron emerged. With the significant immune evasion and transmission advantage of newer Omicron subvariants, it has recently been suggested that they should be called 'SARS-3.' To make matters worse, the current vaccines are less effective at preventing severe disease and death from Omicron. Whereas vaccines were over 95% effective at preventing severe disease and death from pre-Omicron variants, this has now fallen to about 80%.

It is also now clear from multiple large studies that long Covid is a real problem affecting between 10 and 30% of infected people. Of further concern, reinfection increases the risk of harmful long-term outcomes.

If we don't 'recharge' our Covid prevention efforts, current trends would translate into at least 3500 further Covid deaths in New Zealand over the next 12 months - about 10% of all deaths. Over half of New Zealanders have already been infected by Covid and most seem unaware of the risk of reinfection and its consequences.

Simple public health interventions like staying home when you are unwell (from both flu and Covid) and wearing a high-quality mask when indoors and other crowded settings have been demonstrated to make a substantial difference to risk and need to be encouraged/mandated. Mask mandates should be reintroduced in schools (probably our most important super-spreading setting) over the winter to reduce the impact of both Covid and influenza.

In New Zealand we need a range of new programmes to encourage and support everyone eligible to get fully vaccinated against Covid-19 and against influenza. Worldwide, we need governments to allocate funding for a new Operation Warp Speed initiative to complete the development of nasal vaccines and variant-proof vaccines.

The new Covid Response Minister, Ayesha Verrall appropriately signaled today (30 June) that New

Zealand will remain at the orange traffic light setting, but the huge challenge will be to encourage the majority of New Zealanders to get on board with this.

There is still a lot we don't know about Covid-19 and a new variant could change everything (for better or worse) over a matter of a few weeks or months. Watch this space!