



18 October 2021: NZ hospital specialists warn against complacency in fight against Covid-19

Hospital specialists are increasingly concerned about the impacts for communities and on the health system should there be a rapid increase & spread in Covid-19 cases before vaccination targets are met across the country.

That's the message from the Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases (ASID), Internal Medicine Society of Australia and New Zealand (IMSANZ), and Thoracic Society Australia New Zealand (TSANZ) as they warned the Government and community to not drop their guard in the fight against Covid-19.

Hospital & community healthcare capacity and workforce pressures

Rapid increases and regional spread of Covid-19 would adversely affect the healthcare system's capacity to deliver care to our communities, both for those with Covid-19 and for those with other pressing needs for a functional health system to look after them. We acknowledge the work undertaken by the Ministry of Health & DHBs to prepare. In hospitals, there has been much important focus on ICU capacity. Yet most adult inpatients with Covid-19 would be cared for on medical wards by multidisciplinary teams, with some effective therapeutics, after their care by Emergency Department staff. These and many other specialist services have been under sustained demand by a stretched existing healthcare system. Staff vacancies, such as chronic high levels of nursing shortages, have been exacerbated by challenges bringing staff in through the border controls. The most recent outbreak in Auckland has seen the highest number of admissions throughout the region, with modelling suggesting that the peak is yet to arrive. Healthcare staff requiring to stand down from work and self-isolate after exposure to a case, further stretches remaining staff, as has occurred in Auckland. Surges in Covid-19 would often exacerbate existing backlogs in elective care services. Covid-19 patients require isolation in negative pressure rooms to prevent viral transmission between staff and other patients. Many DHBs around the country lack this facility and good ventilation, therefore urgent remedial work is required to allow the hospitals to manage Covid-19 patients safely. This applies to Emergency Departments, Covid-19 wards and ICU.

The largest group of people with Covid-19 will be looked after in the community by primary care and public health services. These services, which encompass a wide range of groups (including Māori and Pacific Island organisations) many of which have risen to the call of Covid-19 are the very services already delivering testing, tracing and vaccination.

The need to reach all communities

We know from years of experience of dealing with infectious diseases that they are innately inequitable with repeated outbreaks and epidemics having catastrophic



effect on Māori and Pacific Island communities. Unless we learn from this history and change our actions to directly address it we are destined to repeat it. Yet, even within this pandemic, the power and strength of these same communities to respond to the threat have delivered outcomes way beyond that achievable through more system-based approaches. We need to trust the community to work together in innovative ways in other under-vaccinated groups, especially those marginalized and affected by material poverty, to prevent or limit their being an entrenched focus of Covid19.

The imperative to slow Covid-19 spread

Now is not the time to drop our guard against the Delta strain. We are at a critical point, where the Auckland Covid-19 outbreak is on the verge of overwhelming the public health response and spilling into other NZ regions. This is requiring primary care to establish models for caring for Covid-19 more in the community but is not a reason to accept 'living with Covid-19' soon. The longer we can keep infection out or less whilst we make progress in achieving the greatest levels of protection the more we can minimise the impact on the health system and therefore the wellbeing of the whole country. Adhering to the alert level restrictions, particularly indoors, will help greatly. Those travelling on valid exemptions into regions without Covid-19 should take great care to minimize the risk of unintended Covid-19 exposure to others.

Vaccination rates

Covid-19 seeks out those unvaccinated and often marginalised populations where transmission can be rapidly amplified. While a single Pfizer vaccine dose provides some protection against the Covid-19 delta strain, the second dose is essential for high levels of protection against symptomatic disease, hospitalization & protecting others. At present, great progress is being made rolling out vaccination in many communities. With double vaccination levels under 50-60% in Māori and Pacific, some regions especially rural, younger age-groups, and vulnerable communities a concerted effort is needed to reach the much higher levels needed. We encourage the Government to enable Māori and Pacific leaders to roll out vaccination programs in ways that work for their communities. Trusted community leaders of all kinds, such as church leaders and top sports personalities, could help to drive increased vaccination rates.

The community's continued resilience in fighting Covid-19 will matter. We acknowledge the huge effort made by so many groups in the community, and recognise the hardships for many, particularly those in Auckland where the current outbreak began. The outcome of the pandemic in Aotearoa is in our hands and if we all work together we still have the opportunity to save lives.

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About The Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases (ASID) Limited

The Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases is the peak professional body for infectious disease and microbiology in the region. Membership encompasses Infectious Diseases Physicians, Clinical Microbiologists, Scientists, Infection Control Practitioners, Public Health Physicians, Sexual Health Physicians, Veterinarians and others eminent in the field of infectious diseases

About the Internal Medicine Society of Australia and New Zealand (IMSANZ)

IMSANZ represents over 900 Consultant Physicians and trainees in Internal Medicine (also known as General Medicine or General and Acute Care Medicine) within Australia and New Zealand).

About the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (TSANZ)

The Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (TSANZ) is the only health peak body representing a range of professions (medical specialists, scientists, researchers, academics, nurses, physiotherapists, students and others) across various disciplines within the respiratory and sleep medicine field in Australia and New Zealand.