

COVID-19 Testing Advisory Committee Meeting Notes

Monday 31 August 2020

Committee Meeting #1

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- After introductions, the Committee discussed their Terms of Reference - the Committee's main role and functions as set out by the Minister of Health.
- The Committee discussed the importance of consulting a wide range of stakeholders to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the COVID-19 testing and surveillance regime and where improvements could be made for the future. The Committee agreed that the consultation process was important to ensure the report's "robustness" and credibility.
- The Committee also discussed the principles of a robust testing/surveillance regime – ensuring implementation is being done – sustainability – is innovative – is equitable and considers vulnerability issues – decision rights and accountabilities are clearly understood – data collection, analysis and reporting are seamless – there is excellent connectivity with communities - and is forward focused on the next eighteen months to two years.
- The Committee agreed on the importance of a visit to Auckland to engage key stakeholders to inform the report.
- The Committee tasked the Secretariat to seek background documents from the Ministry of Health on the testing strategy and surveillance plan.

Tuesday 1 September 2020

Ministry of Primary Industries

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- The timeliness of the Committee's work was noted – that there are opportunities to improve the testing system (eg greater standardisation), especially at the border.
- In terms of the process of developing the border testing regime, a future system should be developed with greater levels of inter-agency consultation and visibility – and that Ministers should be given a range of options and their implications.
- MPI would continue to offer and provide help to the Ministry of Health eg around the exemptions process.
- The operations of the Border Sector Governance Group chaired by NZ Customs is working well.

New Zealand Customs Service

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic was noted and that the New Zealand public service had never before tried to build such an extensive quarantine/managed isolation system.
- As part of this building process, it was noted that MOH engagement and advice is critical to the testing regime at the border – that this is a MoH accountability as a public health issue.
- It was noted that one of the complications for rolling out the border testing regime and providing assurance has been the manual/different reporting/data collection systems. In addition, it was important for the Government to continue to engage the unions on the border testing issue.
- There is a risk at the maritime border of the impending arrival of small craft during the yacht season.

Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- MBIE assumed responsibility for the MIF/MIQ system on 13 July 2020.
- MBIE has been engaging with both the DHBs and MoH on workplace testing and the challenges of a voluntary testing regime. In MIFs, there is an increasing number of returnees refusing the Day 3 test.
- From MBIE's perspective, the key testing issues are: - who is to be tested? who is to do the testing? How Health orders are translated into a practical operational system?
- At MIFs, MBIE's team strongly encourages hotel staff to be tested regularly.
- The other challenge for MIF/MIQ testing regime is data capture and integrity – we need one integrated system for this regime.
- MBIE is focused on developing audit procedures and SOPs including health standards at individual MIFs.

MoH Officials

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- MoH outlined the process for developing the COVID-19 Surveillance Plan – which formed the basis of the COVID-19 Testing Strategy. Ahead of its development, some risk assessment work was done around border closures.
- The Surveillance Plan has not been adapted or evolved since it was first conceived.

Thursday 3 September 2020

Air New Zealand

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- Air New Zealand outlined to the Advisory Committee the protocols/procedures for staff involved in flying to high risk destinations.
- Air New Zealand would support changes to the testing process that would make it more efficient.
- Air New Zealand is keen to explore innovations such as saliva testing – which could form the basis of a safer/quicker/easier/less intrusive testing regime.

Auckland Airport

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- There needed to be a clear idea on who needs to be tested at the Airport – the frequency – and how it works with shift routines at the airport – and it must be easy to access for workers.
- There is also a need to improve the data/reporting management process.
- Messaging to staff about the importance of testing for country and whanau is critical to the testing system's success.
- It was noted that Auckland Airport is a complex operation involving a dozen of agencies and different companies.

Ports of Auckland

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- Ship crew should be tested on the ship or the last port of call.
- Any future COVID-19 testing system should be developed in consultation with port operators.
- The POA will continue to work closely with the DHB on COVID-19 testing.

Worksafe

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat)

- Routine COVID-19 testing of workers in border and MIQ settings is better dealt with by way of specific rules (i.e. an Order) under the COVID-19 legislation, rather than the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) legislative framework.
- In Worksafe's experience as a regulator, desirable outcomes within work settings are best achieved by a mix of duties on all the parties who have a role to play in the system, appropriate to their level of control and influence over the matter.
- There is an inherent asymmetry of information, knowledge, power and control between a worker and the business that engages them to conduct specific work.

- Legal duties need to be mindful of that asymmetry, and work to address it to the extent required to achieve the stated goal of any regime.

Friday 4 September 2020

MBIE – Managed Isolation and Quarantine

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- MBIE runs a lean operation – so would prefer a testing regime that does not impact on preparations – and is inclusive for both staff and returning New Zealanders – is on site – is rostered and at regular times – has an information management system that is slick and captures the right information – staff testing data is currently not joined up – because staff get tested a different sites.

Monday 7 September 2020

Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor - Professor Juliet Gerrard

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- Gerrard commented that the New Zealand Government response to COVID-19 has gone well but there is always room for improvement.
- Gerrard noted that New Zealand is in an unusual position internationally – we are one of the few western democracies pursuing an elimination strategy – and to successfully implement this strategy on an ongoing basis testing remains an important element of the strategy.
- Looking ahead, Gerrard noted that the knowledge and science around COVID-19 has moved fast.
- Saliva testing could be introduced to routinely screen border workers.

MoH Officials

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- It was noted that testing is one of the key pillars of New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy.
- The testing approach changes according to the situation on the ground and case definition considered by TAG.
- In a dynamic/fluid situation, this recalibration of the testing approach has happened in real time as part of the quick response to resurgence.

Tuesday 8 September 2020

Port of Tauranga

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- There was a degree of comfort with the current testing approach where 95% are done on site.
- It was noted that all New Zealand ports should have the same testing regimes/settings as international airports.

Ministry of Transport

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Professor Philip Hill (Member), Dr Api Talemaitoga (Member), Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen (Member), Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- Further work should be undertaken on how testing proposals will actually work in practise.
- The private sector is keen on being consulted more often and should be considered a key stakeholder.
- The importance of having clear and consistent public messaging was noted in order to ensure the public is well informed on key relevant issues (i.e. where salvia testing is at).

Thursday 10 September 2020

Auckland and Counties Manukau District Health Boards

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- It was noted by the DHBs that they have already been doing preparation around planning for the next two years in response to COVID-19.
- Policies around testing that they have developed have been adapted by the Ministry of Health (Health).
- It was stated that the Northern Region response had been run as a CIMS structure and that part of the strong response had been the testing response. It was also mentioned that compared to other countries New Zealand is doing much more testing per positive case.
- It was indicated that they have taken a very collaborative approach with Primary Care and Māori and Pacific Health teams on testing.
- They are doing a lot of work around planning ahead before guidance is ultimately provided by Health at a national level. It was reflected that they are months ahead of Wellington in terms of data collection and how this information is presented.
- For their regions, it was stated that the average turnaround time for test that is received by the lab is around 24 hours.
- Salvia testing will be a game changer for them.

Auckland and Counties Manukau District Health Boards – Māori perspectives.

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- It was noted that communications on testing needed to be more nuanced for different Māori communities.
- During the first outbreak of COVID-19 in New Zealand they determined that within the CIMS response that they needed a specific Māori response arm.
- There were issues to begin with around technology and IT, however these have primarily been solved in current resurgence.
- It was commented that there is a need to plan for more substantiable solutions around testing for the future.
- It was highlighted that without Māori providers that they would not have been able to have been as successful as they had been in the response recently.

Auckland and Counties Manukau District Health Boards – Pacific perspectives.

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- The importance of having mobile Pacific testing teams/units was noted. Additionally, literacy and language were noted as a key barrier for Pacific communities.
- The continuing maintenance of communications and more importantly maintaining an interface with key community leaders was key to maintain engagement of the Pacific community.

Māori Community discussion

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- The value of mobile testing units was highlighted.
- It was noted that there needed to be more engagement with Māori communities around the placement of testing facilities. Long standing testing sites would better suit the communities.
- The issue of adequately communicating testing to Māori communities was noted. There is a need to put a lot more thinking around key messaging for Māori communities about New Zealand's COVID-19 future.

Pacific Community discussion

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- Any testing strategy needed to have consultation with Pacific Church leader who are key community leaders. Community leaders needed to be equipped with the information that enables them to clearly communicate with their communities.
- There needs to be more clear messaging around the exemption process for self-isolating at home, as there is currently confusion in the community around this process.

Monday 14 September 2020

COVID-19 All-of-Government Response Group - Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- AOG have three pillars of functions within their team which are communications, policy and operational. As they have gone on, they have picked things up and also passed them on to other agencies (i.e. MIQs and MIFs from AOG to MBIE).
- DPMC's role is to coordinate and convene and ensure that everyone is connected across the system. The responsibility for the entire response should not be in any one place.
- Further communications and messaging need to occur around explaining why testing occurs and the surveillance plan.
- AOG highlighted workforce issues they are having around the recruitment and retention of staff long term.

Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- It was noted how impressive it was that GPs have responded and stepped up to the challenges that COVID-19 has placed upon them. It was noted that GPs are best equipped to administer the test. GPs generally feel confident in terms of their safety when they administer the test.
- Implementing saliva testing would be hugely impactful for GPs – as the testing is a lot easier and safer for GPs.

Tuesday 15 September 2020

Professor Gabriel Leung, Dean of Medicine, University of Hong Kong

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- Professor Leung said that “New Zealand has done a superb job” in responding to COVID-19.
- He said that border restrictions and controls remain the key to keeping community transmission at bay.

Wednesday 16 September 2020

Labtests

Present: Heather Simpson (Co-Chair), Sir Brian Roche (Co-Chair), Dr Api Talemaitoga, Professor Philip Hill, Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen, Richard Kay (Head of Secretariat), Angelos Gambitsis (Deputy Head of Secretariat)

- On the possibility of saliva testing, it was noted that the main challenge for New Zealand laboratories was how to get a positive sample to trial its sensitivity.
- It was noted that workforce planning for laboratories remains a key issue to be addressed as part of COVID-19 testing.
- The impact of COVID-19 testing on other laboratory work and support to the health system was noted.