

Noting Paper: COVID-19

Cruise Ships

To:	Ad Hoc Cabinet Committee on COVID-19 Response		
From:	Hon Dr David Clark, Minister of Health		
Date:	11 March 2020		
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	20191184

Purpose

1. This noting paper provides an update about cruise ships in the context of COVID-19.

Comment

2. There are three main factors for cruise ships:
 - New Zealanders going on cruise ships abroad
 - Cruise ships coming to New Zealand
 - What is required if there is a case on a cruise ship in New Zealand.

Travel advisories for cruise ships

3. There is growing concern about the risk of COVID-19 occurring on cruise ships.
4. The Governments of Canada and the United States have recently advised citizens to avoid all travel on cruise ships. Australia has advised that those with underlying health concerns should reconsider taking an overseas cruise at this time.
5. Officials from the Ministries of Health, Transport, Business Innovation and Employment, and Foreign Affairs and Trade are considering advice on the potential impacts of issuing a travel advisory for New Zealand citizens and residents for cruise ships.

Information about cruise ships in New Zealand

6. For cruise ships coming to New Zealand, I am advised that as of 10 March 2020, there:
 - a. are 9 cruise ships in New Zealand ports at present
 - b. are 11 cruise ships expected to arrive in March
 - c. are 10 cruise ships expected to arrive in April
 - d. is approximately 20 percent of peak season to go.
7. I am advised that the travel advisories from Australia and the United States could impact up to 74% of cruise passengers travelling to New Zealand. While some passengers may still choose to come, it is possible that this will limit the number of people arriving.

Mitigating risk associated with cruise vessels

8. Managing cruise vessels with suspected COVID-19 cases entering New Zealand waters, or dealing with them once they arrive could slow the importation of COVID-19 in New Zealand and protect New Zealanders from the health effects of a potential widespread outbreak.
9. If a ship arrived in New Zealand that had COVID-19 on board would require a wider government response.
10. Officials are considering whether cancelling all cruise vessel visits to New Zealand for a defined period (i.e. to 1 July 2020) is viable. I am told that this is possible, however it would have significant implications.
11. Cancelling all cruise vessels would present economic impacts for the cruise line sector and local economies. It would however be the most effective way to prevent a ship with COVID-19 entering New Zealand which would require an all of government response (like with the Diamond Princess).
12. We need to consider our approach to cruise ships in the context of our broader pandemic response. I have asked officials for advice on ending the season early that considers the economic impacts of any options as well as logistics, resourcing, and financial costs for the health system and for operation of quarantine facilities.

Powers under the Health Act 1956 as COVID-19 is a quarantinable disease

13. Our decision to make COVID-19 a quarantinable disease means that if a ship arrived in New Zealand with COVID-19 we could respond appropriately. The powers enacted can be exercised to:
 - a. prevent water craft in international waters from being brought to a landing place, and prohibit people from going on board or leaving
 - b. require the quarantine of water craft and travellers where there are grounds to suspect disease
14. While it is possible to use these powers to manage the risk of COVID-19 spreading into the New Zealand community as a consequence of an infection on a cruise ship, there are operational considerations.
15. Health care resources would need to be diverted to dealing with ill passengers, reducing the availability of these resources to ill New Zealanders. If New Zealand were required to provide quarantine facilities for more than 200 people, use of Powers under the Health Act 1956 would be required to facilitate this.

Next steps

16. Officials will provide further advice on cruise ships and continue to maintain contact with representatives of the cruise sector, and marine port operators to monitor the risk associated with COVID-19 on these vessels and any mitigation strategies.

ENDS.