

# COVID TODAY

Latest news and bulletin updates

## The omicron variant, antivax doctor caught on camera and more!

### 'Omicron' seems to be the new buzzword this summer!

By Shazreen Hussain

This new Covid variant Omicron is pronounced as 'Oh-muh-cron'. The new variant, first detected in South Africa, quickly spread around the globe with cases confirmed in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Israel, Hong Kong, and Australia. A number of countries promptly introduced travel bans on certain southern African countries in a bid to curb its spread - although some experts, such as Nicole A. Erretta (a professor at the University of Washington who has researched public health emergency preparedness), think it's too late. Urgent testing was also underway in Sydney after arrivals from southern Africa tested positive.



Dr. Angélique Coetzee, a private practitioner and chair of the South African Medical Association, was one of the first people to notice the new variant. Dr. Coetzee (who treated some of the first patients to be diagnosed with the new strain) says seven patients at her clinic had symptoms different from the dominant Delta variant, albeit "very mild". Omicron was announced by the South African National Institute of Communicable Diseases on 25 November 2021 based on samples taken earlier in the month. The worldwide panic over the new Covid variant Omicron has led many countries to close their borders and impose flight restrictions. The UK is requiring quarantine, and the United States imposed flight restrictions from 29 November 2021 as the new variant emerges.

Dr. Coetzee said the symptoms in patients she observed were "mild". They mainly comprised of body aches, headaches, and fatigue. She said they have been able to treat these patients conservatively at home. She added no loss of smell or taste has been observed and oxygen levels also remained normal in those infected with Omicron. Dr.

Coetzee further stated that the new variant is being primarily observed in individuals aged 40 years or younger, and almost half the patients she treated were unvaccinated.



### So, could Omicron help kill the Delta "beast"?

It may not feel like it, but with Omicron, the new Covid variant, we may be lucky. Some of Australia's leading infectious disease experts, while stressing it is too soon to make a call, are daring to hope. University of Melbourne epidemiologist Tony Blakely said, "we don't know yet, but there are a few clues coming out that it may be less virulent". Blakely added whilst it is all a bit worrying at the moment, it might work to our benefit. Catherine Bennett, a Deakin University epidemiologist, says the evidence so far gives us cause for optimism.

The theory is that if a less infectious strain becomes dominant, more people will become infected, but fewer will be seriously ill. Even though the virus is still a problem, it also becomes part of the solution. This means that every person who recovers from a mild case is left with greater immunity to future infections than any of the current vaccines provide. Under this scenario, future outbreaks of COVID-19 would put less pressure on the hospital and public health systems than the Delta epidemics that Melbourne and Sydney endured the previous winter, under this scenario. This is what the Premier of New South Wales, Dominic Perrottet, is banking on when he cautions against a knee-jerk response to the emergence of the new variant Omicron.

"The measure of success is not case numbers," Perrottet says. "The measure of success is keeping people out of the hospital, keeping people safe, and at the same time opening up the economy to keep people in work and keep businesses open." For now, insufficient data is known about Omicron to say whether it will block or clear a path out of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 29

November 2021, there were only 109 confirmed Omicron cases in South Africa, a further 990 under investigation, and a smattering of confirmed cases in Europe, Israel, Canada, and Australia. Hospital admissions in South Africa are on the rise, although the World Health Organisation has not attributed this to Omicron infections.

The University of New South Wales epidemiologist Marylouise McLaws says this is too small a sample from which to draw firm conclusions and most of the confirmed infections in South Africa are among university students, a group less likely to get extremely ill from any variant of COVID-19. McLaws claims that even a less contagious virus can still put severe pressure on a health system if enough people get infected.

Blakely says there are four important questions about Omicron: whether it is more infectious, more virulent, resistant to vaccines, and more likely to infect individuals who have already had COVID-19. "Once we know those things, we can either let it run or not," he says. "You certainly wouldn't throw the borders open at this stage." The most crucial question - whether Omicron is resistant to available vaccines - is the subject of laboratory investigations anticipated to take two weeks.

Bennett says the question about virulence can only be answered from real-world observations - recorded symptoms and hospital admissions and deaths - as the virus continues to spread. "This is what living with the virus is," she says. "It is about dialling up precautions until we understand things better, then putting an appropriate response in place."



### Vaccine mandates moving the needle - almost 100 fewer firefighters report to work...

Fire and Emergency New Zealand ("FENZ") has done an about-turn after incorrectly trying to prevent employees from accessing the workplace who failed to show a vaccine pass. These employees were prevented from

executing their role or even providing work training. About 100 firefighters could not attend emergency callouts due to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate.

On 30 November 2021 FENZ extended the vaccine mandate to trainers and trainees. NZ Professional Firefighters Union national secretary Wattie Watson cautioned FENZ that this may possibly amount to a lockout. Watson said, "They have got it wrong because they haven't done the due process." Watson further added that instructions cannot be just issued that would affect individuals who turn up on duty and cannot execute their normal responsibilities.



On 1 December 2021, FENZ rescinded the instruction. National manager people and workforce capability Ian Pickard said in a statement. "An instruction was issued regarding ... training last night in error." The instruction from FENZ has now been revoked. "People attending ... training (including trainers) will not be required to show a vaccination pass." On this note, the union stated the error illustrated inadequacies in decision-making by FENZ.

### **The Ruby Princess cannot be prosecuted for carrying COVID-19 to New Zealand**

The cruise ship Ruby Princess that carried COVID-19 to New Zealand will not be prosecuted. This decision follows an investigation that concluded it would not be in the public interest to prosecute the crew and the company.

The cruise left Sydney on March 9 carrying 6271 passengers and 1146 crew members. It arrived in Milford Sound on 11 March making further stops in Dunedin, Akaroa, Wellington and Napier before cutting its trip short and leaving New Zealand waters on 15 March. Numerous people were extremely ill with COVID-19 by the time the ship got back to Sydney on 19 March.

The New Zealand Customs investigation draws no conclusion as to how or when the virus got on board the ship. As a result of the ship outbreak twenty-eight people died and more than 700 were infected. Before it left New Zealand waters the ship had spread the virus to 24 people in the country. It is now known that COVID-19 was present on the ship before it arrived in New Zealand, this was because one passenger was symptomatic and did not receive medical assistance until



16 March. The Customs investigation found that although it was possible for the virus to have been present on the ship prior to it entering New Zealand waters, there was no evidence of the crew or anyone else connected with the ship being aware of an infection prior to arrival.

There was evidence to demonstrate that the crew had committed an offence by failing to submit an Advance Notice of Arrival ("ANA") to Customs at least 48 hours before arriving in Milford Sound. The ANA was submitted eight hours late due to additional passenger screening in Sydney. An ANA is a statutory declaration that must be provided by the person in charge of a ship arriving in New Zealand to allow government agencies time to assess any risk before the ship's arrival.

The Customs investigation found, there was no evidence that the delay was a deliberate attempt to bypass New Zealand border controls as the ANA was submitted quickly after the deadline passed. There was also no evidence that the delay had any causative links to the cluster of the 24 COVID-19 cases in New Zealand. Hence, the investigation found that it was not in the public interest to prosecute Ruby Princess for that offence. In addition, the investigation also found insufficient evidence to prove that the ANA submitted on 9 March was misleading or not legitimate.

The staff of Ruby Princess were aware of six people who were ill before the ship arrived in New Zealand. However, they did not meet the COVID-19 definition criteria, and all were notified prior to the ship being given clearance to arrive. On 14 March when the ship was in Wellington, five passengers were tested for COVID-19, and all returned negative results. At present, Ruby Princess is under criminal investigation by New South Wales Police regarding its arrival in Sydney.

### **On another note... A doctor has been caught issuing fake Covid vaccine exemption certificates**

The Medical Association says police should be investigating an anti-vax doctor caught on camera issuing fake vaccine exemption certificates to anti-vaxxers! Chairman Alistair Humphrey said on 9 December 2021, the the documents being issued by the doctor

indicated a "fraudulent practise" and there was a "strong case to be answered here for fraud".

The Ministry of Health is currently investigating whether Dr. Jonie Girouard has been handing out fake medical certificates to be used as exemptions for getting the Pfizer vaccine. Health officials became aware of this situation following a reporter's undercover sting operation. The reporter went undercover and visited the doctor's Canterbury clinic in a bid to see if he could get an exemption himself.



About 6 minutes later and of course after paying a consultation fee of \$80 the reporter was issued a medical certificate. However, she is clear the exemption will not necessarily work to get around mandates. Girouard told the reporter when he is asked for the exemption, he needs to produce the certificate and explain what it says. She also advised him to do his "spiel" and become a "salesman" to convince whoever asks for the certificate!

### **Please Note!**

Medical exemptions in New Zealand are only being granted by the Ministry of Health. According to the Ministry, there are currently only 325 people in the country who are entitled to them. These medical exemptions have to be signed off by the Director-General of health Dr. Ashley Bloomfield.

If you see any other vaccine certificates out there, they are NOT officially recognized!

### **Resources**

- Ministry of Health ([www.health.govt.nz](http://www.health.govt.nz))
- Work and Income ([www.workandincome.govt.nz](http://www.workandincome.govt.nz))
- Inland Revenue ([www.ird.govt.nz](http://www.ird.govt.nz))
- Covid-19 Official Site ([www.covid19.govt.nz](http://www.covid19.govt.nz))
- BCC News ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com))
- Newshub Official Site ([www.newshub.co.nz](http://www.newshub.co.nz))

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