
To:	General Practices, Pharmacists, After-Hours Centres and Emergency Departments in the greater Wellington and Wairarapa regions
From:	Dr Craig Thornley, Medical Officer of Health
Date:	16/03/2020
Title:	Ministry of Health advisory: Streamlining testing for COVID-19 in the Community

Please distribute the following information to relevant staff in your organisation.

All public health alerts are available at www.rph.org.nz/publichealthalerts

Ministry of Health Advisory / Position Statement Streamlining the testing process for COVID-19 in the Community

As of 16/03/2020, General Practitioners and other primary care practitioners are NOT required to contact the Medical Officer of Health for approval to test for suspected COVID-19 infection.

The steps below now apply for community swabbing:

1. The triaging health practitioner is no longer required to verbally discuss the testing of a suspected case with the local Medical Officer of Health.
2. The Health Act 1956 requires health professionals to notify the Medical Officer of Health on suspicion of a notifiable disease, as per local processes.
3. Results will be communicated by the laboratory to both the investigating primary care practitioner and the local Public Health Unit.
4. The primary care practitioner is responsible for informing the patient of negative results and to provide advice accordingly. The Public Health Unit will inform the patient of positive results.
5. The Ministry of Health has provided advice to primary care and the public about care in the context of a negative laboratory test (eg. Self-isolation, new symptoms) on the website.

See: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-information-specific-audiences/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-resources-health-professionals/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-questions-and-answers-primary-health-care-workers>

<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-health-advice-general-public/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-questions-and-answers>

Rationale for changing testing process:

- The increasing volume of testing in the community for COVID-19 is placing pressure on primary care and Public Health units.

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- The current process for primary care practitioners who suspect a person may have COVID-19 is to call the local Medical Officer of Health to notify a suspected case and be directed to test.
- This process is time-consuming for both primary care and Public Health Units, and is not sustainable as the volume of people requiring testing increases.

The Ministry of Health has provided additional updates and information on COVID-19 <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus>

Application of the position statement in the greater Wellington region

- For notifications to RPH of suspected COVID-19 in the greater Wellington region, follow the usual notification process outlined on the RPH website: <http://www.rph.org.nz/health-professionals/notifiable-diseases/>
- Please phone Regional Public Health during working hours: **04 570 9267**.
- Alternatively, please complete the Health Practitioner Notice of Notifiable Disease form (available at <http://www.rph.org.nz/health-professionals/notifiable-diseases/health-practitioner-notice-of-notifiable-disease.pdf>) and fax to **04 570 9373**; please provide clear information indicating the person's symptoms and travel or exposure history. A form specifically designed for COVID-19 notifications will become available soon.
- To notify urgent public health concerns after hours, phone the on-call medical officer of health on **04 570 9007**, usually until 11pm daily except in an emergency.
- It is the responsibility of the medical practitioner conducting the test to communicate negative results back to the patient.
- Advise the patient to allow **two working days** for results to become available. The patient must stay in self-isolation while awaiting test results.
- If the patient is already in self-isolation (due to recent travel or exposure to a COVID-19 case), a negative test result does not annul the self-isolation requirement; self-isolation must continue for the entire 14 day period from arrival in New Zealand or from last exposure to a case, as appropriate.