

Public Health - measles
Proactive Release : 28 November 2019



20th November 2019

9(2)(a)

E-mail: 9(2)(a)

Dear 9(2)(a)

Official Information Act (1982) Request

I write in response to your Official Information Act request, received by us on 22 October, via transfer from the Ministry of Health, under section 14 of the Act. You requested the following information:

- 1. How many DHB health workers have contracted vaccine-preventable illnesses such as Measles, Whooping cough or Flu, while employed by DHBs in the past decade?**
 - Whether those workers had been vaccinated.
- 2. How many patients, if any, have contracted vaccine-preventable illnesses from health workers or other patients while in hospital in the past decade?**

Counties Manukau Health (CM Health) provides health and support services to people living in the Counties Manukau region (approx. 569,400 people), as well as regional and supra regional specialist services (Burns, Plastics and Orthopaedics). Our services are delivered via hospital, outpatient/ambulatory and community-based models of care. We employ more than 7,500 staff, and see more than 118,000 presentations at the Middlemore Hospital Emergency Department each year.

As a consequence of delivering these services, each day many of our employees come into contact with a wide-cross section of the community, who are unwell and require health care. This increases the chances for them to be exposed to a range of infectious and transmittable illnesses, particularly given the current measles outbreak numbers in our community, but also for seasonal illnesses.

We proactively support our staff to protect themselves, and our community from the risk of infectious and vaccine-preventable illnesses. We use pre-employment screening to confirm immunity status, and also routinely offer (at no cost) seasonal influenza and scheduled vaccinations to staff.

Our responses to your questions are below:

1. How many DHB health workers have contracted vaccine-preventable illnesses such as Measles, Whooping cough or Flu, while employed by DHBs in the past decade?

- **Whether those workers had been vaccinated.**

Whether employees have contracted a specific illness in the last decade is not information that we hold. A medical certificate for sick leave does not need to document the reason for an absence, and we cannot require an employee to disclose information on any medical/ health condition that arise during employment.

We are therefore declining this element of the request under Section 18(g) of the Act - *the information is not held by CM Health.*

However, we note that measles and whooping cough are notifiable illnesses, for which any cases in New Zealand are reported under the Health Act. DHB employees are treated the same as other New Zealanders, including the management during the illness, and any relevant public health screening or contact tracing process. As you have reported, during the current 2019 national measles outbreak, additional information has been collated, included details of numbers of DHBs employees with notified cases of measles / stand-down from work.

We confirmed for you (31 October 2019), that seven CM Health related individuals were confirmed as contracting measles, including five staff and two healthcare students.

Of these, three were back office staff who had no face-to-face contact with patients, and four worked on the frontline. For our frontline staff, two staff had previously showed immunity when tested for pre-employment screening requirements.

As we noted in an earlier response to you (06 August 2019), the detail of individual employee immunity/ vaccination status is private health information, which is provided confidentially, and only held in individual employee files. In all cases, these individuals were stood-down from work when the measles rash was identified.

We do not believe that knowing further details of each individual's specific vaccination status outweighs the importance of protecting their privacy.

Therefore, we are declining the remainder of your request under Section 9(2)(a) of the Official Information Act, to protect the privacy of natural persons.

Due to the high prevalence of measles in the Counties Manukau community, it remains difficult to confirm where these employees initially contracted measles. As you have already reported, cases of measles can occur in a small proportion of people who have been vaccinated.

Influenza has a seasonal vaccination programme, but is not subject to the same degree of surveillance. We currently only routinely collate organisation-wide information on the employee uptake of Seasonal Influenza vaccination. Influenza vaccine is offered to all staff annually, it is not mandatory, nor is it 100% effective. Vaccinated individuals can still get influenza despite being vaccinated.

Whooping Cough requires regular revaccination to boost the immune response and remain effective.

2. How many patients, if any, have contracted vaccine-preventable illnesses from health workers or other patients while in hospital in the past decade?

Cases of any suspected infectious conditions admitted to hospital are monitored by our Infection Control service, and cases of potential patient-to-patient cross-transmission are tracked. Given the large numbers of people on hospital sites, and the current very high prevalence of measles (and seasonally for influenza) cross-transmission of any virus by unwell visitors and staff can occur and definitive tracing is problematic.

We have robust infection control measures, and there is currently no indication that during this outbreak any patients have contracted measles from coming into contact with staff while in hospital. Regarding Whooping Cough, we complete contact tracing if cases arise, and no cases of employee contracting/ transmitting whooping cough from contact with other patients have been identified.

We continuously re-iterate to all staff the importance of all Infection Prevention and Control 'Standard Precautions', use of isolation and routine hand hygiene to reduce the risk of exposure to transmittable diseases. These controls are designed to prevent the spread of infection in the hospital, in conjunction with employee immunity screening and proactive vaccination.

As in our prior response, given the current measles outbreak and that measles is an exceptionally infectious disease; we are promoting additional key messages to our employees, including the importance of checking their immunisation status, the greater risk of exposure and the benefits of immunisation. These are consistent with the messages from the Immunisation Advisory Centre and the Auckland Regional Public Health service.

I trust this information satisfactorily answers your query. If you are not satisfied with this response you are entitled to seek a review of the response by the Ombudsman under section 28(3) of the Official Information Act.

Please note that this response or an edited version of this may be published on the Counties Manukau DHB website.

Yours sincerely,



Fepulea'i Margie Apa
Chief Executive Officer
Counties Manukau Health