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28 May 2024

§ 9(2)(a)

Ref: H2024040471

Tēnā koe § 9(2)(a)

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to the Ministry of Health – Manatū Hauora (the Ministry) on 30 April 2024 for information regarding a Technical Advisory Group for the National Immunisation Programme. You requested:

*“TAG for the National Immunisation Programme
Please provide minutes, memos and reports from the above or any group where the intended function of this group was placed.”*

In response to your request, I can advise that the Ministry is currently in the final stages of establishing a National Immunisation Technical Advisory Group (NITAG) to provide health agencies with independent and evidence-based recommendations on the use of preventative vaccines. As the NITAG has not yet had its first meeting, the group has not produced any minutes, memos or reports. I would like to note that, once the NITAG is established and meetings commence, we intend to make key material available on the Ministry's website.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG) was established in 2021 to provide science advice and recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccinations. CV TAG ceased on 25 March 2023. Information regarding CV TAG's advice and recommendations is publicly available through the following links:

- www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/corporate-information/about-us/expert-groups/covid-19-vaccine-technical-advisory-group-cv-tag/ - CV TAG Memos.
- www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/information-release/h2023021776.pdf, www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/information-release/h2023021776_2.pdf - CV TAG Minutes 2021 & 2023.
- www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/information-release/h2022017624_response_letter.pdf - CV TAG Minutes 2022.

I have identified two further documents in scope of your request. The documents and decisions regarding release are outlined in Appendix 1.

Pharmac's Immunisation Specialist Advisory Committee also has functions that in other countries would sit with a NITAG. This Committee provides objective clinical advice and makes recommendations to inform Pharmac's decision-making on vaccine funding and eligibility. Records of the Immunisation Advisory Committee are publicly available here: pharmac.govt.nz/about/expert-advice/specialist-advisory-committees.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of your request with us, including this decision, please feel free to contact the OIA Services Team on: oiagr@health.govt.nz.

Under section 28(3) of the Act, you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to review any decisions made under this request. The Ombudsman may be contacted by email at: info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or by calling 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Manatū Hauora website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ross Bell', is positioned above the typed name.

Ross Bell
Acting Deputy Director-General
Public Health Agency | Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui

Appendix 1: List of documents for release

#	Date	Document details	Decision on release
1	17 November 2023	Minutes: <i>COVID-19 Vaccine Expert Advisory Network</i>	Some information is withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the Act, to protect the privacy of natural persons.
2	23 November 2023	Memo: <i>Additional dose considerations for summer 2023: COVID-19 Vaccine Expert Advisory Network (CV EAN) recommendations</i>	

MINUTES: COVID-19 Vaccine Expert Advisory Network

Date: Friday 17 November 2023

Time: 9:00 am to 9:28 am

Location: Manatū Hauora Ministry of Health, 133 Molesworth St. Wellington,
GC.11, Microsoft Teams: s 9(2)(a)

Chair: Ian Town

Members: Danny de Lore, David Murdoch, James Ussher, Nikki Moreland

Ministry of Health Attendees: Alison Cossar, Euan Russell, Anihana Thorpe, Geoffrey Roche, Bonnie Jones,
Susanna Chung, Imogen Roth, Meg Galloway

Guests:

Apologies: Elizabeth Wilson, Helen Petousis-Harris, Nikki Turner, Peter McIntyre, Owen Sinclair, Sue Crengle, Sean Hanna, Tony Walls

1.0	<p>Welcome</p> <p>Dr Ian Town welcomed all members, attendees, and guests in his capacity as Chair of the COVID-19 Vaccine Expert Advisory Network (CV EAN).</p>
2.0	<p>Scene setting</p> <p>Dr Town outlined the reason for gathering members together and thanked them for coming together at short notice and noted that immunisation governance structures were still being established. Dr Town asked members to consider previous CV TAG advice in the current context.</p> <p>A presentation was provided which outlined the current context in Aotearoa New Zealand, recent data on BA4.5 vaccine effectiveness and peak body recommendations on duration between doses.</p> <p>Members were asked to consider which groups Te Whatu Ora should promote an additional dose before the end of the year to</p>
3.0	<p>Overview of the current context and international recommendations</p> <p>Members present considered the latest data on COVID deaths, antiviral dispensing, case numbers, hospital occupancy, SARS-CoV-2 levels in wastewater, and booster uptake data. Members agreed that based on current evidence, Aotearoa was starting to experience another wave of COVID-19 infections.</p> <p>The committee determined that the previous CV TAG advice on vaccine recommendations is enduring and is considered to remain appropriate.</p> <p>Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased social gathering during the Christmas period was noted • Increased circulation of new variants internationally was noted

Document 1

- It was noted that vaccine eligibility is the remit of PHARMAC rather than this committee.
- It was noted that Māori and Pacific peoples had a higher level of vulnerability.
- Regarding pregnancy, the current approach is that case be discussed with the lead maternity provider.
- No basis for shortening the 6 month dose interval was identified.

Recommendation

Those recommended to have a further booster using the Pfizer bivalent vaccine are:

1. The elderly (over 65 years of age),
2. Māori and Pacific peoples over 50 years of age,
3. Those in aged residential care facilities.

Noted:

1. The recommended dose interval is 6 months after last dose or infection
2. For those not able to or unwilling to receive the Pfizer vaccine, Novavax is recommended

4.0 Next steps/Decisions Pending

Committee members have been asked to advise by return mail by COB Monday 20 November whether all agree with the recommendation above. This advice will then be provided to the Director of Public Health, Dr Nicholas Jones, who will recommend Te Whatu Ora carry out vaccination campaigns over the coming weeks.

It was noted that the process for advice being provided to Ministers, and for decision making, has been substantially simplified. No other business was raised.

5.0 New Actions Raised During Meeting

#	Agenda item	Actions	Action Owner	Updates
4	Next steps/decisions pending	Circulation of the draft advice to committee members to confirm agreement	Imogen Roth	Completed

Meeting closed at 9:28 am

Next meeting: none

Memo

Additional dose considerations for summer 2023: COVID-19 Vaccine Expert Advisory Network (CV EAN) recommendations

Date:	23 November 2023
To:	Dr Nicholas Jones, Director of Public Health, Office of the Director of Public Health, Public Health Agency Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui
Copy to:	Dr Andrew Old, Deputy Director-General, Public Health Agency Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui Louise Karageorge, Group Manager, Intelligence Surveillance and Knowledge, Public Health Agency Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui Alison Cossar, Manager, Public Health Policy & Regulation, Public Health Agency Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui Dr Imogen Roth, Manager, Public Health Insights Intelligence Surveillance and Knowledge, Public Health Agency Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui
From:	Dr Ian Town, Chief Science Advisor, Evidence Research and Innovation Te Pou Whakamārama
For your:	Decision

Purpose of report

1. This memo provides information on the recommendations for which groups should be targeted (recommended) to receive an additional dose of COVID-19 vaccine.
2. Members of the COVID Vaccine Expert Advisory Network (CV EAN) convened on 17 November 2023 to consider the current epidemiological context of COVID-19 in Aotearoa and recommend what groups should be recommended an additional dose of the COVID-19 vaccine before the end of 2023.

Background and context

3. On 13 November 2023 the National Director of the National Public Health Service (NPHS) requested that the Public Health Agency convene an expert advisory meeting to provide advice on additional boosters, considering a recent increase in COVID-19 infections.
4. The COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group previously provided advice to the Ministry of Health on vaccine purchasing and eligibility. The Group has since been disbanded but former members remain available to provide advice on an ad hoc basis as an Expert Advisory Network.

5. Pharmac is now responsible for decisions on vaccine purchasing and eligibility, and had sought similar advice from its Immunisation Specialist Advisory Committee on 9 November on booster timing and eligibility in anticipation of winter 2024. Several members of this committee are also members of the Expert Advisory Network. In recognition of Pharmac's role and to avoid repetition of advice, the question posed to the Expert Advisory Network was restricted to "who should be recommended to receive an additional dose of COVID-19 vaccine before the 2023 Christmas/New Year period." The Director of Public Health would then make recommendations based on that advice to NPHS.
6. Additional questions around modifying or extending COVID-19 vaccine eligibility were proposed for the meeting but these were identified to sit within the remit of Pharmac.
7. Based upon deaths attributable to COVID-19, increased antiviral uptake, reported cases, hospital occupancy, and levels of SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater, current data suggests Aotearoa may be in the stages of another wave of COVID-19 infections as of 17 November 2023.
8. Vaccination data indicates it has been six months or longer since last vaccine doses, and recent studies suggest a protective effect against serious illness up to seven months post-vaccination with the Pfizer bivalent vaccine.
9. There is concern that as Aotearoa heads into the summer holiday period, there will be increased social gatherings which could both increase the rate of infections in the population and potentially put vulnerable populations at risk.

Data is suggestive of a wave of new SARS-CoV-2 infections

Aotearoa COVID-19 data indicates increasing case numbers, hospital occupancy and deaths

10. Reported daily cases of COVID-19 have been increasing since October, with a larger uptick occurring in November (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1: Rolling seven-day average of reported daily cases of COVID-19 infections

11. Hospital occupancy due to COVID-19 has been increasing since around August, with larger increases occurring around October (**Figure 2**).

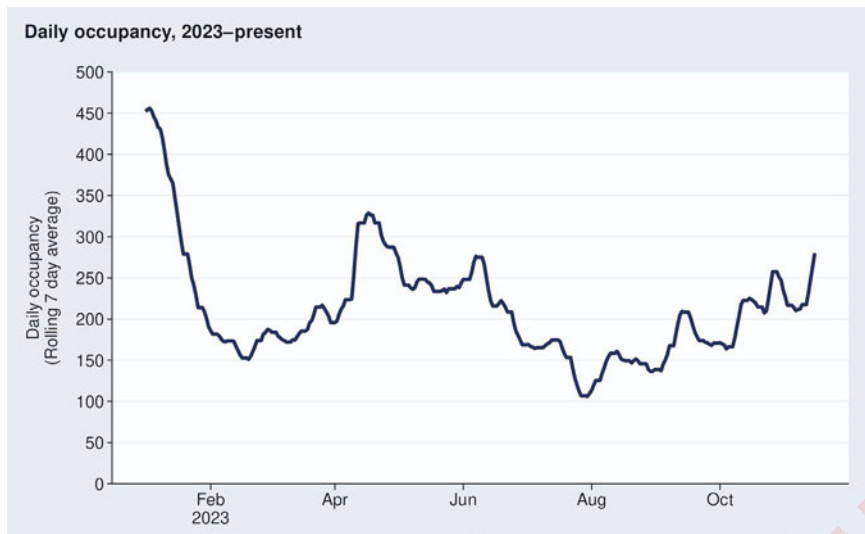


Figure 2: Rolling seven-day average of hospital occupancy due to COVID-19 infections

- COVID-19 deaths were decreasing from October but are now currently increasing on a similar trajectory to the winter 2023 period (**Figure 3**). COVID-19 deaths are currently sitting at around 4 deaths per day, and have predominantly been in those aged 80 years or older.

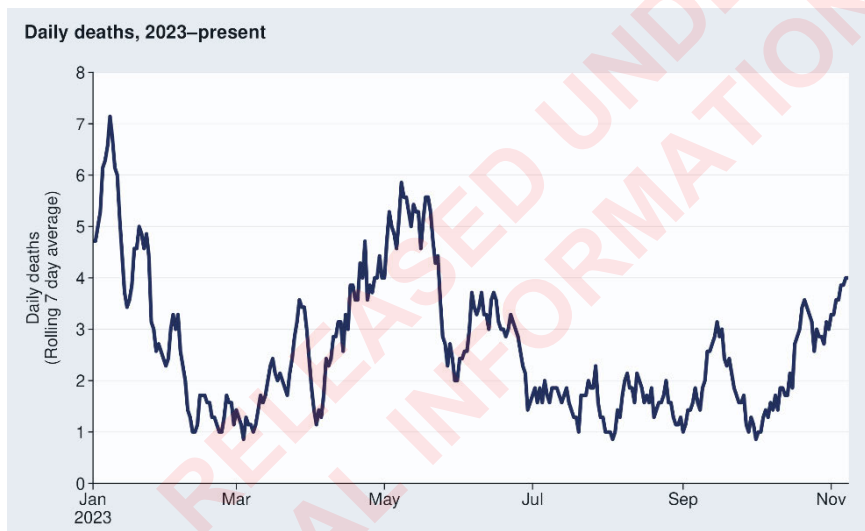


Figure 3: Rolling seven-day average of daily deaths attributable to COVID-19

- SARS-CoV-2 levels in wastewater are increasing nationally, from late October from a previous plateau from late August (**Figure 4**).

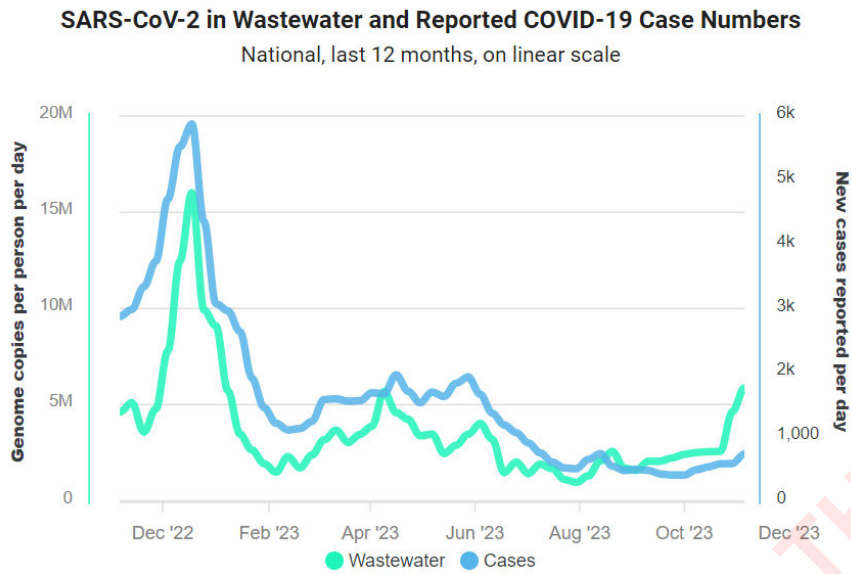


Figure 4: National SARS-CoV-2 level in wastewater over time

- 14. Levels of antivirals being dispensed have increased slightly over the past four weeks, with a large increase in number of courses from September onwards (Figure 5).

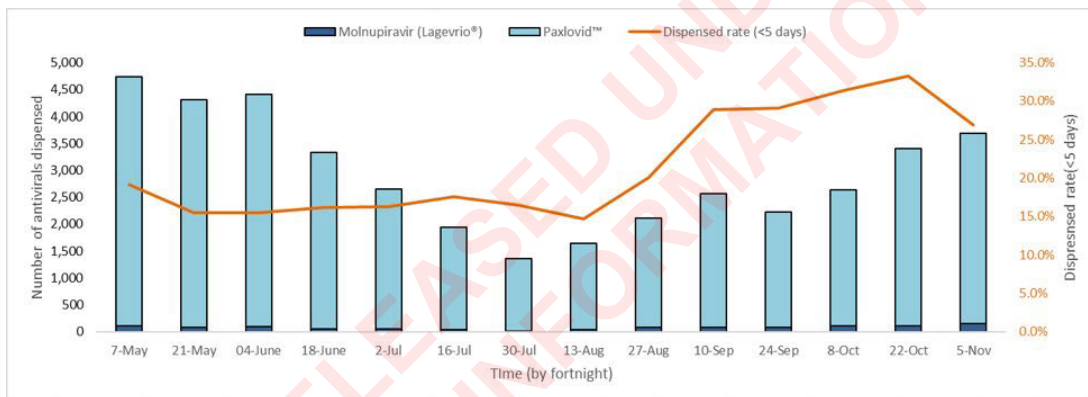


Figure 5: Numbers of antivirals dispensed over time in Aotearoa

Aotearoa data indicates that it has been six months or more since additional doses

- 15. Data on booster uptake suggests that the last significant booster uptake occurred around April/May 2023 (Figure 6), suggesting those who would benefit the most from booster vaccination are now six months since their last dose. This correlated to the availability of the Pfizer BA 4/5 bivalent vaccine in the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

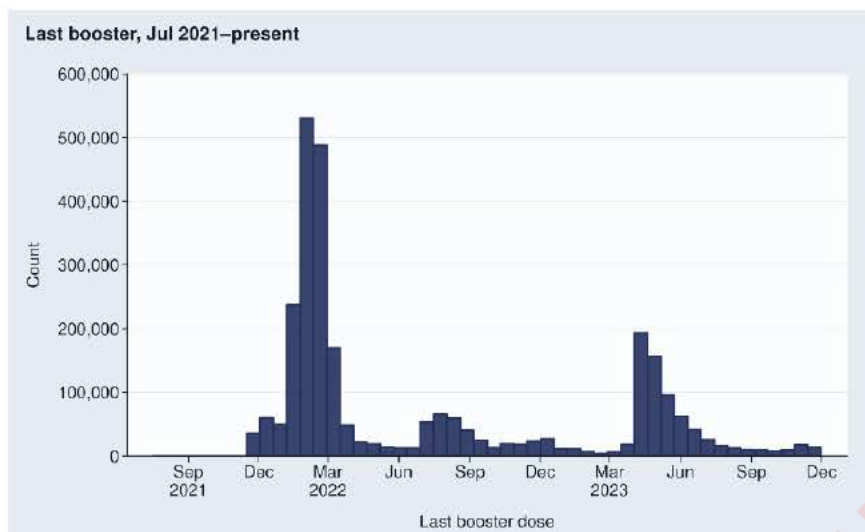


Figure 6: Distribution of the national population by date of last booster dose of COVID-19 vaccine

Peak body advice for intervals between doses varies internationally

16. The recommended interval between doses per international advice, ranges from two months or more for the US CDC, to 12 months by the World Health Organization (**Table 1**).

Agency	Time between additional doses
ATAGI ¹	6 months
UKHSA ²	>3 months
US CDC ³	>2 months
Canada ⁴	6 months or longer
WHO ⁵	12 months but 6–12 months for vulnerable people

Table 1: Peak body recommended time between additional doses of COVID-19 vaccine

Recommendations from the COVID vaccine EAN

17. CV EAN noted:

- a. COVID-19 vaccine eligibility is the remit of Pharmac than that of the COVID vaccine expert advisory network.

¹ [ATAGI Update on the COVID-19 Vaccination Program | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)

² [A guide to the COVID-19 autumn programme - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [Clinical Guidance for COVID-19 Vaccination | CDC](#)

⁴ [COVID-19 vaccines: Canadian Immunization Guide - Canada.ca](#)

⁵ [WHO roadmap on uses of COVID-19 vaccines in the context of Omicron and high population immunity - 20 October 2023](#)

- b. Based upon local data and evidence presented within the meeting, Aotearoa is in the early stages of another wave of COVID-19 infections.
- c. There are no signals yet of this wave having more severe outcomes for individuals than during previous waves.
- d. There will be increased social gatherings during the Christmas period that may influence SARS-CoV-2 infections.
- e. There is increased circulation of new variants (particularly XBB subvariants) internationally and domestically, that may influence patterns of immunity in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- f. There is no strong basis or evidence for shortening the current recommended six-month interval between doses or following infection.
- g. Previous CV TAG advice (see Appendix) is enduring and should be the basis of future recommendations.

18. **CV EAN recommends:**

- a. Given there is no observed evidence that this wave is more severe than previous waves, the enduring guidance provided by CV TAG in the memo '**Booster eligibility addendum: COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG) recommendation**' should be applied to this wave and all subsequent similar waves.
- b. Based upon this prior advice (see **Appendix**), the following groups should be **recommended** to have a further booster dose of the Pfizer BA.4/5 bivalent vaccine:
 - i. Elderly (>65 years of age),
 - ii. Māori and Pacific peoples >50 years of age,
 - iii. Those who have a medical condition that makes them severely immunocompromised,
 - iv. Pregnant people,
 - v. Residents in aged residential care facilities.
- c. The recommended interval between doses remains at six months.
- d. The Pfizer BA.4/5 bivalent is the preferred vaccine. However, Novavax may be offered in the same manner as an alternative option.

Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

1.	Note	That eligibility for additional doses of vaccine remains the same, and is the remit of Pharmac	Yes/No
2.	Note	The recommendations of COVID Vaccine Expert Advisory Network members	Yes/No
3.	Agree	To formally advise NPHS to continue promotion of COVID vaccine boosters to the recommended group for whom six months have passed since their last vaccine dose or SARS-CoV-2 infection	Yes/No

Signature:

s 9(2)(a)

Dr Ian Town

Chief Science Advisor

Chair of COVID-19 Vaccine Expert Advisory Network

Manatū Hauora, Ministry of Health

Signature _____

Dr Nicholas Jones

Director of Public Health

Public Health Agency, Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui

Date:

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Appendix

Previous advice on COVID-19 vaccine recommendations from the CV TAG memo: 'Booster eligibility addendum: COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG) recommendations' – 24 March 2023

COVID-19 vaccine recommendations

Age Band		Primary Course	First Booster	Additional Doses
< 5 years	healthy			
	at risk ¹			
5 - 11 years	healthy			
	at risk ²			
12 - 15 years	healthy			
	at risk ³		Severely immunocompromised only	
16 - 17 years	healthy			
	at risk ⁴			
18 - 29 years	healthy			
	at risk ⁴			
30 - 49 years	healthy			
	at risk ⁴			
50 - 64 years	healthy			
	Māori & Pacific peoples			
	at risk ⁴			
≥ 65 years	healthy			
	at risk			

recommended

eligible, i.e. individuals can consider

not eligible, i.e. not available in the programme but can be administered with prescription

¹ Severely immunocompromised, **or** complex and/or multiple health conditions increasing risk of severe disease from COVID-19 (following the Starship Child Health table of underlying comorbidities)

² Children with high-risk pre-existing conditions, Māori and Pacific children should be prioritised (for details see [CV TAG memo](#))

³ People with severe immunocompromised conditions

⁴ At-risk groups include those at high risk of severe COVID-19 **and/or** eligible for flu vaccine because of a health condition (see Appendix 1 and 2) **or** residents of an aged- or disability facility. For **16- to 29-year-olds**, at-risk groups are eligible rather than recommended to receive an additional dose. However, those in this age group with more severe conditions or multiple comorbidities should particularly consider an additional dose.

Note: All **pregnant people 16 years of age and over** are eligible for additional doses, however, those with comorbidities should particularly consider an additional dose.