

7 December 2020

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 (the Ministry) on 12 November 2020 regarding SARS-CoV-2.

My answers to your questions are as follows.

"Please could the Ministry of Health detail which New Zealand facilities, when and how medical researchers have isolated SARS-Cov-2 from symptomatic patients - identified Cov-2 virus directly, under an electron microscope? (Given that New Zealand is working on a vaccine I would assume that the virus isolation has been done in this country....)"

SARS-CoV-2 is usually characterised by genetic tests that specifically detect viral ribonucleic acid (RNA). There are some laboratories in New Zealand that have isolated the virus and viewed it under a microscope. You may be interested in a presentation by Professor Miguel Quiñones Mateu available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqtGlxsHaGA, in which at time points 11.40 and 16.20, the SARS-CoV-2 virus that was imaged in New Zealand within PC3 biosafety laboratories is shown.

The Ministry does not hold information regarding where the SARS-CoV-2 samples are taken from, nor when and how New Zealand researchers isolated the virus. As such, your request for this information is refused under section 18(g).

"If this has been done, what is the GenBank number for this virus?"

The viral isolates recovered in New Zealand are all deposited on GISAID (www.gisaid.org), a global science initiative that promotes open-access to data about influenza viruses, and the coronavirus responsible for COVID-19. GISAID is the primary point where researchers are globally depositing data, although some of these genomes may also be mirrored at GenBank (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/genbank), which is part of the National Centre for Biotechnology Information in the United States.

"In which peer reviewed medical journal has, or will, the isolation, verification and description of NZ SARS-Cov.2 viruses, be published?"

The Ministry does not hold information on where researchers might publish data, nor does it know when the research might be published. As such, your request for this information is refused under section 18(g).

"Please also detail the process New Zealand researchers have been using, to determine genetic deviations from the first isolated, and described NZ COV-2 virus."

The following paper characterises some of the SARS-CoV-2 lineages in New Zealand:
www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.28.20221853v1.full.pdf. This publication also details the process (protocols) on how these genomes are sequenced.

I trust this information fulfils your request. 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 Ministry website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Yours sincerely



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