

# Memorandum

## Swabbing for COVID-19 in Community Pharmacies

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**Security level:** IN CONFIDENCE      **Health Report number:** HR20210529

**To:** Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response

**Cc:** Hon Andrew Little, Minister of Health

### Contact for telephone discussion

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**Action for Private Secretaries:** N/A

# Swabbing for COVID-19 in Community Pharmacies

## Purpose of report

1. This report updates you on the project to investigate the feasibility of swabbing for COVID-19 in community pharmacies.

## Background

2. On 6 November 2020 the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) prepared advice on the role community pharmacies could potentially play in COVID-19 swabbing (HR20201895 - Swabbing for COVID-19 within Community Pharmacies). The next steps which you agreed in the Health Report were for the Ministry:
  - to begin engagement with DHBs, pharmacy sector representatives and laboratories to canvass the appetite of the sector to carry out testing and then agree an implementation process;
  - to scope practical and operational issues that need to be addressed – safety processes, interface with testing laboratories, supply of PPE and swabs, training, etc; and
  - to discuss the possibility of setting up a trial at selected pharmacies to test the process and public acceptance.

## What engagement has taken place with the Pharmacy Sector?

3. Exploratory meetings were held with the CEOs of key pharmacy sector stakeholders in November and December 2020 to canvass their support for the proposal. Representatives were from the Pharmaceutical Society of New Zealand, the Pharmacy Guild of New Zealand, Green Cross Health, the Māori Pharmacists Association (MPA) - Ngā Kaitiaki o te Puna Rongoā o Aotearoa, and Central Region Technical Advisory Services Limited (TAS).
4. A working group consisting of operational and technical representatives from the pharmacy sector, TAS and the Ministry was then established to explore the feasibilities and the significant risks identified behind the proposed model.
5. Although the group indicated that the pharmacy sector was keen to contribute to New Zealand's surveillance strategy and testing plan, it was recognised that participating in the programme would pose some major risks and issues:
  - maintaining the safety of pharmacy staff and customers – particularly in response to any new more transmissible variants, and uncertainty regarding what infection prevention control and personal protective equipment (PPE) measures would be implemented to mitigate this risk;
  - workload - how would swabbing impact the capacity of pharmacists to perform their core business of medicine distribution, especially given that pharmacies will also be used in the roll-out of the COVID-19, measles mumps and rubella (MMR) and annual influenza vaccination programmes;

- perceived risk to business - public perception of the dangers of pharmacies performing swabbing for COVID-19 could make people reluctant to enter pharmacies, and business continuity concerns due to the economic impacts (and disruption to medicines supply and advice) if a pharmacy needed to close due to a positive COVID-19 case being identified;
- funding - economies of scale may not support the cost required for individual pharmacies to set up the process, however it is difficult to predict levels of swabbing with any accuracy for the proposed model and to ascertain whether the risks associated with the programme would outweigh the economic benefits.

### **What is the status of the project?**

6. In addition to working through the practical and operational issues internally and within the Operating Working Group, engagement was undertaken with DHBs to determine how community pharmacy swabbing would support their overall testing plans, particularly as it related to access. However, the programme received little support across the DHBs generally, with DHBs indicating that they thought pharmacies were best engaged in the COVID-19 response via the vaccination programme, and that the focus should be on community pharmacies being supported to deliver vaccination delivery. There were only three DHBs - Lakes DHB, Southern DHB and West Coast DHB - who reported their local workforces are stretched enough to consider community pharmacy as a useful addition to COVID-19 testing.
7. Following the exploratory investigation into the programme's feasibility, representatives of the pharmacy sector agreed in a Working Group meeting on 23 March 2021 not to continue to progress the programme on a national level, but to continue to target only those local areas that DHBs had identified as potentially requiring pharmacy support.
8. This decision was a result of two factors:
  - a. the significant risks identified for the community pharmacy sector, in particular a perceived risk to business continuity and the economic impact should a pharmacy be forced to close due to a positive case being identified.
  - b. the DHBs indicating limited support for the programme.

### **Using the outreach of Māori pharmacies to target Māori communities**

9. As part of this wider workplan to explore the feasibility of swabbing for COVID-19 in community pharmacies, the Ministry is currently working with Ngā Kaitiaki o te Puna Rongoā o Aotearoa (MPA) to explore the development of a pro-equity COVID-19 testing model which would aim to improve access to testing for COVID-19 for Māori. The MPA is proposing to engage with community pharmacies and to develop a "by Māori, for Māori" community outreach programme for delivery in areas with high Māori populations. The model is planned to be scalable and mobile - that could be deployed at times of surge - and could work alongside other testing models (e.g., supporting pop-up testing stations).
10. This work will continue over April 2021 during which time the Ministry will work with iwi and DHBs, including the iwi leads, to consider implementation.

## Next steps

11. The Ministry will continue working with the pharmacy representatives and facilitate conversations with Lakes District Health, Southern DHB and West Coast DHB to identify pharmacies that could potentially participate in swabbing.
12. The Ministry will continue working with the MPA on progressing an aligned programme of work to target Māori communities.
13. Implementation is expected to be in May, and the Ministry will report back to you on progress in mid-May 2021.



Sue Gordon

**Deputy Chief Executive**

**COVID-19 Health System Response**

Date: 25 March 2021

PROACTIVELY RELEASED