

Briefing

Update on the roll out of the option of saliva testing for COVID-19 to border workers

Date due to MO:	5 August 2021	Action required by:	N/A
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	20211764
To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response		

Contact for telephone discussion

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Minister's office to complete:

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Decline | <input type="checkbox"/> Noted |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change | <input type="checkbox"/> Seen | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's Notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn | |

Comment:

Update on the roll out of the option of saliva testing for COVID-19 to border workers

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE

Date: 5 August 2021

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

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide an update on the roll out of saliva testing for COVID-19 to border workers subject to mandatory testing under the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Required Testing) Order 2020 (the Required Testing Order).

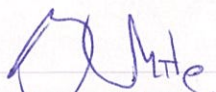
Summary

2. The Ministry of Health (the Ministry) has been assessing the role of testing for COVID-19 using saliva as a sample for some time. By April 2021, the Ministry was confident in using saliva as a sample that the recommendation was made to begin preparing to roll it out to relevant border workers as an additional testing option.
3. A saliva testing prototype was conducted in Canterbury. Persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) and workers at the time raised several issues with the proposed regime, that led to a low uptake. Many concerns related to the regime's requirement for workers to continue with some nasopharyngeal swab tests and the compatibility of the saliva testing frequency with complex shift patterns.
4. Since then, the Ministry has updated its position on saliva testing, based on international literature, validation work by local laboratories, and the position of the New Zealand Microbiology Network. The Ministry is now confident there are surveillance situations where testing for COVID-19 may be carried out using saliva samples instead of nasopharyngeal swabs. This includes the regular testing of border workers.
5. This updated position is now being acted on by introducing saliva testing, using a refined testing regime, as an option for border workers.
6. An implementation plan is in place with a phased rollout starting from 11 August 2021, when the amended Required Testing Order (RTO) is expected to come into force.
7. The rollout will be phased in such a way that it meets border site-specific requirements and demand, including ongoing high levels of managed isolation and quarantine facility (MIQF) occupancy.
8. There are several potential challenges to the successful rollout of saliva testing, including ongoing hesitancy to changing testing regimes, which are being proactively addressed.
9. The rollout of saliva testing will be reviewed in mid-September with recommendations for further changes including the testing cycle and to the Border Workforce Testing Register (BWTR), if appropriate.
10. Adaptations will be made as necessary, and, from October, saliva testing will become part of 'business as usual' for border worker surveillance testing.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** the Ministry has acted on its updated position on saliva testing and developing a revised saliva testing regime. **Yes** ☒ **No** ☐
- b) **Note** the Ministry has balanced the public health, science, legal and policy views with feedback from agencies, PCBUs and border workers in finalising arrangements for saliva testing. **Yes** ☒ **No** ☐
- c) **Note** the process of implementing saliva testing as an option for border worker surveillance testing is well underway and that a phased rollout will commence from 11 August 2021 when a revised Required Testing Order is expected to come in to effect. **Yes** ☒ **No** ☐
- d) **Note** a process for monitoring border worker compliance with saliva testing has been developed, utilising the Border Workforce Testing Register (BWTR). **Yes** ☒ **No** ☐
- e) **Note** the Ministry will be monitoring the uptake of saliva testing and that a review of the rollout is planned to take place in September 2021. **Yes** ☒ **No** ☐



Bridget White

Deputy Chief Executive

COVID-19 Health System Response

Date: 4/8/21



Hon Chris Hipkins

Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 19/8/2021

Update on the roll out of the option of saliva testing for COVID-19 to border workers

Background

11. The Ministry has been assessing saliva as a sample for testing for COVID-19 for some time as part of its COVID-19 surveillance strategy. Previously, evidence had shown that saliva testing was not as sensitive as nasopharyngeal swabs, meaning there was the potential for missed infections. A single missed infection could have a significant effect in New Zealand, where there is a very low prevalence of COVID-19, and potentially lead to widespread community outbreaks.
12. By April 2021, the Ministry had become confident enough in saliva as a sampling method that the recommendation was made to roll it out to border workers at a higher frequency, albeit with a regular nasopharyngeal swab to mitigate any associated risks with a lower sensitivity test.
13. A prototype has been underway in Canterbury since 28 June 2021. In delivering the prototype, PCBUs and workers raised several issues with the testing regime, that ultimately led to low uptake. The concerns included concerns about lowering the efficacy of testing and hence increasing risk and that complex and irregular shift patterns made compliance with a higher frequency testing regime difficult for border workers. There was also a perception by workers that there would be a direct one for one swap of nasopharyngeal swabs for saliva tests and expressed unwillingness to provide samples outside of work hours.
14. Since then, the Ministry has continued to review emerging science and validation studies by New Zealand and overseas laboratories. These have provided further confidence in saliva as a sampling method.

The Ministry's updated position on saliva testing

15. In April 2021, as a result of new evidence and information and the advice of the Ministry's Saliva Testing Clinical Governance Group, the Ministry revised its position on saliva testing having become confident that there are surveillance situations where testing for COVID-19 may be carried out using saliva samples instead of nasopharyngeal swabs. These include where frequent testing of border workers has the potential to identify cases earlier and before chains of transmission are generated.
16. It was also identified that saliva testing would support the need for increased frequency of testing of the border workforce as they become vaccinated. There is compelling evidence that as vaccinated individuals are less likely to be symptomatic if infected, and therefore less likely to seek a test outside of the regular testing regime, the frequency of surveillance should be increased.
17. This updated position has enabled changes to be made to the saliva testing regime in preparation for national rollout. This includes removing the need for a nasopharyngeal swab and simplifying the testing regime. This updated position has also facilitated engagement with agencies and PCBUs to refine the testing process and overcome many of the issues raised by PCBUs and workers during the Canterbury prototype. It is

anticipated that these changes will significantly increase uptake in this testing option. Current estimates are that 25% of border workers may opt into saliva testing, but the ongoing survey of workers will provide more information on this.

Implementation of saliva testing for border worker surveillance testing

18. The Ministry has established a cross-agency working group to support the successful implementation of saliva testing for all relevant border workers, across the air and maritime borders and MIQFs. It has also engaged with DHB Health Leads and DHB Testing Leads across all three sectors.
19. The implementation programme includes five key stages; pre-planning, engagement, mobilisation, a phased rollout and monitoring and transition to 'business as usual'.
20. Pre-planning has been completed and the engagement and mobilisation phases are well underway. A phased rollout of saliva testing will begin on 11 August 2021.

Engagement

21. The Ministry has been carrying out a 'roadshow' (in tandem with the Ministry's Vaccination Team where possible) to promote saliva testing to workers. Communications collateral has been developed for PCBU's to share with their workers. This is also being used as an opportunity to meet PCBU's and DHB Leads, including Medical Officers of Health, to update them on saliva testing.
22. Meetings have so far been held in Auckland, Wellington, Gisborne, Christchurch, Taranaki and Nelson. A schedule of ongoing engagement in order to prepare specific sites, regions and sectors is in place.

Mobilisation

23. The mobilisation phase ensures that the necessary infrastructure is in place.
24. The saliva testing service provider, Asia Pacific Healthcare Group (APHG), is conducting site meetings to finalise arrangements for the location of drop-off and collection booths, saliva kit restocking arrangements, confirming courier schedules and other logistical arrangements.

Phased Rollout

25. All workers on a 7-day testing cycle are, as a priority, being invited in the week commencing 2 August to opt into saliva testing. There will be a transition period as workers who opt-in to saliva testing undertake the final nasopharyngeal test in their current cycle.
26. Workers on a 14-day testing cycle are also being invited to opt into saliva testing. Compliance monitoring for regular testing has shown that maritime border workers, most of whom are on a 14-day testing cycle, are most likely to be non-complaint. This group of workers, however, also showed strong support for saliva testing in the pre-planning phase. Accordingly, it was decided to include these workers in an early phase of the rollout of saliva testing.
27. The Ministry has been working with the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) to deliver a phased rollout for MIQF workers. The phasing of the rollout to MIQF workers will help enable uptake given the other change activity taking

place at MIQFs such as returnees from Australia, Olympians returning from Tokyo, and the move to the use of P2 / N95 particulate respirators by non-healthcare workers.

28. To begin with, testing will be conducted involving MIQF workers at the Jet Park facility in Auckland, all of whom are currently on a 7-day testing cycle and are already familiar with saliva testing, albeit on a voluntary basis.
29. To ensure the participation of the healthcare workforce who test border workers and are therefore subject to required testing, meetings have been held with each of the DHBs' health leads and DHB leads for Auckland and Christchurch International Airport and for each of the ports. Some DHBs have agreed that they will just be treated as PCBUs, while others are actively involved in leading the rollout. The Northern Region Health Coordination Centre is supporting the rollout across the Auckland region.

Updated border work saliva testing regime and monitoring compliance

Amending the Required Testing Order (RTO)

30. To enable border worker surveillance testing to be done using saliva testing alone, without any a nasopharyngeal testing, a change to the RTO is necessary. Ministerial consultation on a draft Amendment Order for the RTO has been completed. A final Amendment Order will be provided to you on 6 August for your signature by 9 August to enable the Amendment Order to come into force on 11 August.

Saliva testing regime

31. The updated saliva testing regime will apply to all workers subject to mandatory COVID-19 testing the under the RTO who opt into saliva testing. It will see them conduct a series of a tests within a seven-day period. Each series will include a minimum of two tests at least two days apart, but workers can choose to test more than twice if it works for them and provides them additional reassurance. Any positive saliva test result will need to be confirmed via a nasopharyngeal swab.
32. In addition, the saliva testing guidance will encourage border workers who are going on an extended period of leave (more than seven days) to undertake another saliva test three days after their final working day, or alternatively to have a nasopharyngeal test. The testing regime will be under review throughout the phased rollout and in the review of saliva testing to take place in mid-September and further changes to the RTO will be considered thereafter.

Monitoring compliance

33. As part of the engagement phase, we have been working with PCBUs and workers to facilitate their understanding of and participation in the saliva testing regime and the compliance process.
34. Discussions during the engagement phase have indicated that border workers see saliva testing as simple and this suggests compliance with be at least maintained. Testing compliance is already high in some sectors, particularly amongst MIQF workers. It is anticipated that saliva testing will help assist compliance for maritime border workers and others who work night shifts when nasopharyngeal testing centres are closed as saliva testing is self-administered.
35. The saliva testing process includes the worker scanning a barcode on their sample tube when they deposit a sample, using the dedicated COVID-19 saliva testing 'app' provided

by APHG. This will allow the BWTR to receive almost real-time information on when workers fulfil their testing requirements, facilitating the compliance monitoring process. The app will also be used to provide test result notifications to workers. A manual process is available for those without access to the app.

36. Monitoring border worker compliance with the saliva testing regime will be performed in the same way that it is currently for nasopharyngeal testing, utilising the BWTR and the Monitoring and Outreach team at the Ministry and the Workforce Team at MBIE. Non-compliance will be addressed firstly by education of the relevant PCBU and worker, followed where necessary by escalation to a directive letter. If required, an infringement notice will be issued.
37. The BWTR can differentiate between border workers undertaking saliva testing and those continuing to undergo nasopharyngeal testing. Levels of compliance with each will be reported on separately.

Key dates

38. A summary of the phased rollout of saliva testing sites, regions and sectors is provided in the table below:

Date	Where / Who
Week of 2 Aug	Ongoing engagement and preparation for rollout
Week of 9 Aug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auckland Airport • Jet Park MIQF • Northport • Port of Opuia • Ports of Auckland • Chelsea Port • Devonport (RNZ Naval Base) • Kauri Point, Birkenhead (RNZ Naval Base) • Viaduct Marina • Silo Marina • Westhaven Marina • Port of Tauranga • Lyttleton Port
Week of 16 Aug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gisborne (Eastland Port) • Taranaki (Port of Taranaki) • Nelson (Port Nelson and Marlborough Port) • Wellington (Centre Port) • Timaru (Prime Port) • Dunedin (Port Otago)
Week of 23 Aug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remaining ports • Canterbury airport • MIQFs in Wellington, Rotorua and Hamilton
Week of 6 Sep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phased rollout for remaining MIQFs

Potential challenges to saliva testing

39. There are several potential challenges to successfully introducing saliva testing as an option for border workers.
40. Level of uptake - This has been a key focus in the development of the saliva testing programme and the engagement campaign has been designed to promote uptake to all border workers.
41. Nationwide access - APHG are confident that saliva testing will be available to all border workers through the phased rollout.
42. Confidence in saliva testing - The programme of engagement has included the provision of information and reassurance about the science supporting saliva testing and what would be required if a saliva test is positive (the need for the worker to undertake nasopharyngeal test). The phased rollout will allow workers to take up saliva testing when they are ready.
43. Complex shift patterns - This is being addressed during the Ministry's 'roadshow' and via the communication collateral being distributed. This is an iterative process and collateral will continue to be developed over time as feedback is received.
44. 'Change fatigue' - Along with the introduction of saliva testing, the rollout of the vaccination programme is ongoing and changes to mandatory vaccination requirements for certain border workers are imminent. Additionally, changes are also being made to the respiratory masks worn by workers in MIQFs. The phasing of the rollout has been planned to work with these other priorities.
45. PCBU Data quality - This is already managed by the compliance team for nasopharyngeal testing and is mitigated by monitoring information provided by, and regularly communicating with, PCBUs.
46. Compliance – Some PCBUs have expressed concerns about a drop in testing compliance, at least initially as workers get used to saliva testing. This will be managed through active monitoring, including separate reporting on saliva testing compliance, and proactive follow-up over non-compliant workers.

Next steps

47. Saliva testing will be operationalised first at Auckland International Airport, Jet Park Auckland, Christchurch International Airport and the Ports of Auckland. For these sites, from 11 August 2021 border workers will be able to start opting into saliva testing. The phased rollout of saliva testing for border workers at all other sites will continue thereafter.
48. Throughout the phased rollout of saliva testing the Ministry will monitor the level of uptake by border workers and supporting any workers who wish to opt in.
49. A review of the saliva testing rollout will be conducted in mid-September 2021. It will likely look at what has been learned about the reliability, practicality, uptake of and sustainability of saliva testing as part of the COVID-19 surveillance of the border workforce. The review will include consideration of the scientific, public health, PCBU and worker perspectives. Plans for this review will be developed during the rollout, and timeframes will be adjusted if the rollout requires this.

50. Following this review, consideration will be given to further refining the saliva testing regime. As a result, further changes may need to be made to the RTO.
51. This will also be an opportunity to consider whether there are other opportunities to utilise saliva testing in other situations, such as for community testing or testing international arrivals.
52. The Ministry will report on the findings of this review in early October 2021.

ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED