

Memo

The use of COVID-19 vaccines during an outbreak: COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG) recommendations for prioritisation of first doses nationwide

Date: 20 August 2021

To: Joanne Gibbs, Director of National Operations, COVID Vaccine and Immunisation Programme

From: Dr Ian Town, Chief Science Advisor

For your: Consideration

Purpose of report

1. To summarise the COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group's recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines during an outbreak, endorsing the prioritisation of vaccination capacity nationwide to allow the maximum number of people to receive at least a single dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine.

Context

2. On 19 May 2021, CV TAG provided advice on the use of the Pfizer/BioNTech (Comirnaty) COVID-19 vaccine in an outbreak. The recommendations were:
 - *The characteristics of the Pfizer/BioNTech (Comirnaty) COVID-19 vaccine mean that it cannot be used in the traditional sense of ring vaccination. However, targeted vaccination can be used to encourage 'community confidence' and increased uptake of the vaccine.*
 - *Any targeted vaccination should be implemented alongside other public health measures and not as a standalone measure. A protocol should be developed and ready for implementation if we have an outbreak.*
 - *There is no international data on using the COVID-19 vaccine for targeted vaccination to inform what the trigger point would be for deploying this strategy. The situation in New Zealand means that there may be an opportunity to gain some experience should it be necessary to deploy such a measure.*
 - *There will be communities with low vaccine coverage, and we will need a protocol to ensure increased coverage while maintaining equity in an outbreak setting. The process of progressively relaxing controls at the border may lead to potential outbreaks in some communities.*
3. Currently, New Zealand is at Alert Level 4, indicating COVID-19 is not contained, with a significant number of cases of community transmission in Auckland. Cases have also emerged in Wellington, linked to the Auckland cluster.

4. Demand for vaccinations is high, and there are concerns that at risk groups – such as essential workers – may not be able to access vaccination in a timely manner.
5. There are also concerns that the ability to access vaccinations may be disproportionately difficult for some members of the population, and that this may worsen existing inequities in vaccine coverage, with consequences for the risk of transmission and infection in some communities.
6. The COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme (CVIP) sought clinical and scientific advice from CV TAG on the use of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine in an outbreak.

Recommendations

7. CV TAG noted that:
 - a. One dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine provides good protection against severe disease and hospitalisation.
 - b. Two doses of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine are needed to fully protect against infection, and vaccine efficacy is lower in immunocompromised groups. Therefore it is important that immunocompromised groups and those in groups 1, 2 and 3 receive two doses.
 - c. There is growing evidence that longer intervals between doses are not inferior, and may provide a better immune response, further supporting decisions to delay second doses.
8. CV-TAG endorses the following approach for the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine:
 - a. All capacity nationwide is used to prioritise:
 - i. The two-dose course for Groups 1, 2 and 3 of the sequencing framework, including children 12 years of age and
 - ii. A single dose for Group 4 including children 12 years of age and over.
 - b. Māori and Pacific peoples should be urgently prioritised within all groups due to increased risk of infection, severe disease, and low current vaccination coverage.
9. This approach will apply for this current outbreak and will be kept under regular review or on request from CVIP.

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