

23 June 2022

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s 9(2)(a) [REDACTED]

By email: s 9(2)(a) [REDACTED]
Ref: H202207345

Tēnā koe s 9(2)(a) [REDACTED]

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), which was transferred from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) to the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) on 1 June 2022 for:

*all documentation, all communications and all reports between
1) the Government and WHO*

On 7 June 2022, you were contacted by the Ministry and asked to clarify your request, as your initial request would require a substantial amount of time to collate and involve a search for this information manually across a number of teams within the Ministry.

On 7 June 2022, you clarified your request to:

*Did the WHO instruct the NZ Government to prepare for an imminent coronavirus pandemic?". I am requesting all documentation, all communications and all reports between:
1) the Government and WHO
For the period covering 1 October 2019 to 31 March 2020*

It is important to clarify that the World Health Organization (WHO) does not instruct Member States on the management of public health matters. Rather, the Organization informs and provides advice on emerging public health issues, including public health emergencies of international concern, for Member States to consider independently and take action as they deem appropriate.

The Ministry has designated a “national focal point” (NFP), which is responsible for ensuring that WHO information and alerts about acute public health risks with possible international implications are disseminated within relevant entities. Information sharing between the WHO Secretariat and New Zealand’s NFP takes place through a secure web-based platform – the Event Information Site (EIS).

On 5 January 2020, the WHO shared preliminary information with New Zealand and other governments about a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause through the EIS. The event notice provided information on the cases and advised Member States to take precautions to reduce the risk of acute respiratory infections. This marked the beginning of a series of further updates the WHO made on the emerging novel coronavirus via the EIS throughout January 2020 and subsequently.

On 31 January 2020 (NZT), the WHO Director-General determined that the novel coronavirus outbreak constituted a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), the WHO's highest level of alarm under the International Health Regulations 2005. Later, on 11 March 2020, the WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic. You can access a complete timeline of the WHO's COVID-19 response (that references key information sharing incidents) at: www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/interactive-timeline#.

You have requested all documents, communications and reports from the WHO to the New Zealand government on an "imminent coronavirus pandemic". We interpret this to mean the WHO EIS alerts as outlined above. As WHO EIS communications are shared with the New Zealand government in confidence, your request is refused under 6(b)(ii) of the Act, as its release would prejudice the entrusting of information to the Government of New Zealand on a basis of confidence by an international organisation.

However, you may be interested in accessing previous WHO press briefings on novel coronavirus and COVID-19 from January 2020 – September 2020 at:

www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/media-resources/press-briefings/previous/11. These media updates, alongside the timeline for the WHO's COVID-19 response (link above) summarise EIS communications to all WHO Member States at the early stage in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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.

Nāku noa, nā



Sarah Turner
Deputy Director-General
Office of the Director-General