

# Advice to border sector: COVID-19 becomes a quarantinable disease

6 JULY 2020

## Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) has determined that the COVID-19 event constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The Ministry of Health has assessed the likelihood of further cases imported into New Zealand as 'high'.

Effective border management is very important to limit the spread of COVID-19 in New Zealand.

## Addition to the Health Act 1956

On 11 March 2020, 'novel coronavirus capable of causing severe respiratory illness' and 'COVID-19' will be added to Part 3 of Schedule 1 of the Health Act 1956.

This means 'novel coronavirus capable of causing severe respiratory illness' and 'COVID-19' will be quarantinable diseases and the quarantinable disease provisions in the Health Act 1956 and the Epidemic Preparedness Act 2006 can be used if necessary.

As a result, vessels or aircraft may be quarantined when they come into New Zealand, where there are grounds to believe there may be cases of COVID-19 on board. The public health emergency contingency plans will be activated if a person on board the aircraft or vessel is suspected of having COVID-19.

## What it means for aircraft, airports, shipping companies, ports and/or travellers

Those in charge of arriving aircraft or vessels are already required to notify health officers of suspected cases of particular illnesses, including COVID-19. Health officials are then able to move quickly and comprehensively to contain infection threats at the border and manage the risk posed by those on board.

Also, Medical Officers of Health have powers to manage individual travellers under the Health Act 1956, such as issuing written directions restricting their movement and association.

Making COVID-19 a quarantinable disease means that health clearance (pratique) will be withheld from any vessel or aircraft if there is someone on board who has symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or is confirmed with COVID-19.

This enables public health officers to undertake a risk assessment. The ill traveller will get a medical assessment and treatment through the sea or airport first responders (often St John or Wellington Free Ambulance). Public health staff will provide advice to close and casual contacts (including crews). This can be done in the airport or port, depending upon the emergency plans.

Aircraft have a health clearance unless they report an ill traveller.

The same provisions were applied to the Health Act 1956 during the H5N1 (Swine Flu) pandemic in 2009 and no aircraft or vessels were quarantined.

For vessels, the usual 'advance notice of arrival' and 'no change in health status report' will still be required.

If a suspected quarantinable disease is on board, the vessel will need to come into port showing its Q flag or Q lights. No person will be able to disembark until pratique is issued following a health risk assessment and putting the appropriate measures in place according to the public health emergency contingency plans.