

Dangerous Liaison: New Zealand virus quarantine flaw exposed

January 29 2021, by Nick Perry



The Grand Millenium hotel, a managed isolation facility is seen in central Auckland, New Zealand, July, 16, 2020. A traveler and a worker at the quarantine hotel started passing each other notes, including one written on the back of a face mask. Then he delivered a bottle of wine she'd ordered to her room. When he didn't return 20 minutes later, a security manager sent to investigate found the pair together in what authorities are describing as an inappropriate encounter, one in which physical distancing wasn't maintained. (Sylvie Whinray/New Zealand Herald via AP)

The woman who took a flight back to New Zealand was supposed to avoid all physical contact with others for 14 days as she went into mandatory quarantine. The man working at the quarantine hotel was supposed to be the last line of defense.

But the two started passing notes to each other, including one written on the back of a face mask. Then she ordered a bottle of wine, which he delivered to her room. When he didn't return 20 minutes later, a security manager sent to investigate found the pair together in what authorities are describing as an inappropriate encounter, one in which physical distancing wasn't maintained.

The incident earlier this month, which came to light Friday, has highlighted a very human weak point in New Zealand's coronavirus elimination procedures, in a country which has stamped out community spread of the virus. It is similar to lapses in Australia that may have contributed to a major outbreak last year in Melbourne.

"We're dealing with human beings," said COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins. "We ask everybody to adhere to the standards that we put in place. I cannot control the actions of every individual."

Hipkins said the pair's behavior was totally unacceptable and he'd asked for a thorough inquiry.

Brigadier Jim Bliss, the head of managed isolation and quarantine, said the worker was immediately sent home and told to self-isolate. He was later fired. The returning traveler, meanwhile, was given a formal written warning by the police. Authorities breathed a sigh of relief after both returned negative [coronavirus](#) tests.



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"The actions of the two people involved in this incident are incredibly irresponsible and extremely disappointing," Bliss said. "There is absolutely no room for complacency."

Bliss said the actions of the staffer at the Grand Millennium Auckland hotel weren't reflective of the 4,000 people working at quarantine hotels

who each day "selflessly put themselves between us and this virus." He said an investigation is underway to consider whether additional security measures are needed.

The identities of the two people involved have not been disclosed by authorities.

New Zealand's successful response has resulted in just 25 people dying from the virus in a nation of 5 million. The only new cases are those originating from returning travelers, 100,000 of whom have flown in over the past year. Authorities and people around the country remain highly tuned to any breaches at the border.

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