

As virus cases go from 1 to 24,000, New Zealand changes tack

March 8 2022, by Nick Perry



A health worker gives out Rapid COVID-19 antigen self-test kits at the Waipareira Trust drive-in COVID-19 testing station in Auckland, New Zealand, Tuesday, March 8, 2022. Back in August, 2021, New Zealand's government put the entire nation into lockdown after a single community case of the coronavirus was detected. On Tuesday, when new daily cases hit a record of nearly 24,000, officials told healthcare workers they could go back to work in understaffed COVID-19 wards even if they were mildly sick themselves. Credit: Brett Phibbs/New Zealand Herald via AP

Back in August, New Zealand's government put the entire nation on lockdown after a single community case of the coronavirus was detected.

On Tuesday, when new daily cases hit a record of nearly 24,000, officials told [hospital workers](#) they could help out on understaffed COVID-19 wards even if they were mildly sick themselves.

It was the latest sign of just how radically New Zealand's approach to the virus has shifted, moving from elimination to suppression and now to something approaching acceptance as the [omicron variant](#) has taken hold.

Experts say New Zealand's sometimes counterintuitive actions have likely saved thousands of lives by allowing the nation to mostly avoid earlier, more deadly variants and buying time to get people vaccinated. The nation of 5 million has reported just 65 virus deaths since the pandemic began.

But virus hospitalizations have been rapidly rising, hitting a record of more than 750 on Tuesday and putting strain on the system.

Across the country, the explosion in cases has left people stunned. Just a month ago, case numbers were around 200 per day. Now, the outbreak is affecting everyone from frontline workers to lawmakers.

Opposition Leader Christopher Luxon became the highest profile politician yet to announce he was infected on Monday, saying he felt fine and would continue working from home.



A health worker gives a COVID-19 booster shot at the Waipareira Trust drive-in COVID-19 testing station in Auckland, New Zealand, Tuesday, March 8, 2022. Back in August, 2021, New Zealand's government put the entire nation into lockdown after a single community case of the coronavirus was detected. On Tuesday, when new daily cases hit a record of nearly 24,000, officials told healthcare workers they could go back to work in understaffed COVID-19 wards even if they were mildly sick themselves. Credit: Brett Phibbs/New Zealand Herald via AP

One factor that hastened the outbreak was the return of thousands of [university students](#) to campuses around the country last month.

Ralph Zambrano, the [student](#) president at Victoria University of Wellington, said the virus had spread rapidly through hundreds of

students in residence halls, taking a toll on their [mental health](#) and well-being.

"The campus would usually be buzzing at this time of year but it has a very eerie feeling to it," he said, adding that most students were opting to learn remotely. "There's lots of anxiety and tension."

He said the outbreak had strained the food supply system in the halls, with some students being offered only a protein drink for breakfast or a piece of cold meat and some peas for dinner.

The university said case numbers in the halls were now reducing as students recovered.

Professor Michael Baker, an epidemiologist at the University of Otago, said the variant had proved as ferociously infectious in New Zealand as it had in other countries.

He said cases appeared to be plateauing or even starting to dip in the largest city of Auckland, while still rising elsewhere.



A health worker rests at the Waipareira Trust drive-in COVID-19 testing station in Auckland, New Zealand, Tuesday, March 8, 2022. Back in August, 2021, New Zealand's government put the entire nation into lockdown after a single community case of the coronavirus was detected. On Tuesday, when new daily cases hit a record of nearly 24,000, officials told healthcare workers they could go back to work in understaffed COVID-19 wards even if they were mildly sick themselves. Credit: Brett Phibbs/New Zealand Herald via AP

While much of the world was [breathing a sigh of relief](#) after two years of terrible problems, Baker said, New Zealand was at its worst point yet in the pandemic and was coming to terms with the fact the virus would remain in the country permanently.

He said he was concerned health authorities had lost the ability to

properly track the outbreak, as they struggled to shift from a system where they carefully monitored a few cases to dealing with thousands of self-reported results from rapid antigen tests.

Dr. Caroline McElnay, the director of public health at the Ministry of Health, told reporters the number of hospitalizations would grow, but that patients with omicron generally had less severe illnesses than previous patients had experienced with the delta variant.

She said the rising number of both patients and infected health workers had prompted the relaxation in the rules around when [health workers](#) could return to hospitals.

She said infected workers would only be allowed to work with patients who already had the [virus](#), and if there were no other options.

"It's an extra tool that enables our [health](#) system to keep running," she said.

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