

COVID-19 (mate korona) Vaccinations, 2021

Background and purpose

COVID-19 (mate korona) is a newly discovered (novel) coronavirus first identified in China in 2019 as the cause of a cluster of pneumonia cases. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on 30 January 2020, and it continues to mutate and present risk to all countries of the world (WHO, 2020).

The COVID-19 virus has proven to be increasingly fast spreading and easy to catch. Poor housing, overcrowding, and working in low paid industries such as supermarkets increases virus spread among disadvantaged members of society. Current inequities in New Zealand society further predispose Māori and Pacifica populations to risk from the current pandemic (MSD, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in job losses, loss of freedoms through lockdown including the ability to attend Tangihanga/funerals, being unable to be present as required under tikanga expectations for wairua support of sick and/or dying whānau, disruption to study. This has caused significant loneliness and hardship for many New Zealanders (MSD, 2020).

Historically Māori and Pacifica communities have experienced worse illness and outcomes during pandemics as evidenced by the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, where the infection rate for Māori was twice that for Pākehā (Steyn et al, 2020). Steyn et al. suggest similar inequalities will occur with the current pandemic. Recent experience with the COVID-19 indicates that Māori and Pacific people are at much greater risk of hospitalisation following infection with COVID-19 (Steyn et al., 2021). There is a range of important precautions recommended to help protect patients and their whānau, health workers and the wider community from these viruses including: hand hygiene; access to and use of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); respiratory hygiene; aseptic 'non-touch' technique for all invasive procedures; cleaning and disinfection of patient-care equipment and linen; cleaning and disinfection of surfaces; and safe waste management.

These precautions are extremely important and are now supported by an established vaccination programme in Aotearoa New Zealand. This NZNO position statement endorses vaccination as the most effective protection for Aotearoa New Zealand and aligns with the position of other professional and industrial organisations in the health sector.

Tōputanga Tapuhi Kaitiaki o Aotearoa (NZNO) Position

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation -Tōputanga Tapuhi Kaitiaki o Aotearoa (NZNO) acknowledges an individuals' right to choose their own health-control measures which includes holding their own views about vaccinations. However, NZNO strongly recommends that all its members take up the opportunity to be vaccinated unless medically contraindicated.

Furthermore, NZNO strongly discourages any member from engaging in anti-vaccination messaging in any form.

NZNO will represent its members who cannot or choose not to be vaccinated to ensure their employment rights are upheld and relevant professional obligations are understood.

Aotearoa New Zealand

Vaccination is a crucial part of the Aotearoa New Zealand public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The vaccine helps prevent people from becoming infected and developing COVID-19 symptoms, or severe illness. Vaccinated people may have no COVID-19 symptoms or have fewer, milder symptoms and recover faster, reducing the likelihood of 'long COVID'. Emerging research is indicating there is also reduced spread of the virus (IMAC, 2021).

There are currently some employment situations where vaccinations are mandated, for example members working in a Managed Isolation and Quarantine Facility (MIQF) (COVID-19 Public Health Response (Vaccinations) Order 2021). This is to help reduce risk to those individuals in isolation, staff working in the facilities and the wider community.

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, NZNO acknowledges the unique relationship health professionals have with tāngata whenua and our obligation of active protection under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Active protection in this context must include promoting and supporting vaccination, therefore fostering values that ensure an equitable, fairer society that recognises our collective responsibility as partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi to deliver on this commitment (MoH, 2020).

NZNO prioritises taking an ethical and equitable approach to considering the rights of all nurses, their patients and the wider community as part of COVID-19 vaccine rollout (MoH, 2021).

Member obligations

Registered nurses, enrolled nurses and nurse practitioners and registered midwives have professional obligations under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (2003) and associated regulations.

The Nursing Council of New Zealand (NCNZ) in their Guidance Statement on Vaccination (2021) statement that nurses have an ethical and professional obligation to protect and promote the health of patients and the public by:

- **Getting their COVID-19 vaccination.** The Nursing Council “strongly recommends that all practising nurses take up the opportunity to be vaccinated—unless medically contraindicated.”
- **Contributing to community efforts to prevent the spread of this coronavirus.** Patients are entitled to information that a reasonable consumer, in that individual's circumstances, would expect to receive (Right 6, Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights). Therefore, nurses have a professional obligation to provide evidence-based advice and information about the COVID-19 vaccination to others to assist informed decision-making and informed consent.

Furthermore, NZNO believes this professional obligation extends to prioritising those most at risk of adverse outcomes which further entrench health inequities for some,

including Māori and Pacific communities. Promoting vaccination in those communities is therefore a professional obligation of nurses.

NCNZ also states “As a regulator we respect an individual’s right to have their own opinions, but it is the Council’s view that there is no place for anti-vaccination messages in professional health practice, nor any promotion of anti-vaccination claims including on social media and advertising by health practitioners” (NCNZ, 2021).

The Midwifery Council’s Guidance Statement (2021) also endorses vaccination of midwives and the role of midwives in supporting their clients and whānau to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

NZNO members who are healthcare providers but not classed as registered health professionals, such as health care assistants, also have an important role to play in Aotearoa New Zealand public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

They have obligations under the Health and Disability Commissioner (Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers’ Rights) Regulations 1996 to provide services to consumers with reasonable care and skill, to act to ensure consumers are fully (and accurately) informed, to provide services in a manner that minimises the potential harm and to provide services that comply with legal, professional, ethical, and other relevant standards. By maintaining awareness of current Ministry of Health information they can promote and support vaccination for themselves, their families/whanau, health consumers and colleagues in their work environments.

Vaccine Hesitancy and Unvaccinated Members

NZNO notes that a decision not to be vaccinated as a healthcare worker could have serious consequences for not only that worker but also for their colleagues, their patients, their family/whanau, and the wider community.

Vaccine Hesitancy

For those members who are hesitant to receive or provide information on the vaccine there is information on the Immunisation Advisory Centre (IMAC) website (<https://covid.immune.org.nz/news-insights/replay-engaging-vaccine-hesitant-collaboration-adhb>) to support engagement.

Unvaccinated Members

For those members who cannot or choose not to be vaccinated there are a variety of points to be considered.

- Employers must act to uphold the broad employment rights and responsibilities of employees under the Employment Relations Act 2000.
- Employers are required to act to minimise real and potential risks to and from unvaccinated staff under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.
- Employees are required to act to minimise real and potential risks to patients, colleagues and their employers under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. This includes managing risk when working as an unvaccinated healthcare worker or working with a healthcare worker who is unvaccinated.

Some actions employers may take to manage risk could include, but are not limited to, undertaking a risk assessment to determine individual vulnerability, requiring the unvaccinated employee to wear PPE, redeploying the person to a lower-risk role, and requiring certain roles to be undertaken by vaccinated persons only.

Reasonable actions planned or taken by employers to reduce the risk both to their employees and health consumers may vary depending on community transmission risk, alert levels and Government health orders in place at the time.

NZNO member entitlements are outlined in a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document on the NZNO website.

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Mission statement

NZNO is committed to the representation of members and the promotion of nursing and midwifery. NZNO embraces Te Tiriti o Waitangi and works to improve the health status of all peoples of Aotearoa/ New Zealand through participation in health and social policy development.

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