



Public Health Association defends government's approach to COVID-19

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The Public Health Association supports the public health leadership demonstrated by New Zealand's government in its pandemic response to COVID-19. Many more people would have died without this rapid evidence-based operation.

CEO Dr Prudence Stone says many PHA members expressed their disappointment to her this week that a few members of the academic community were publicly questioning New Zealand's response to COVID-19.

"The aim for our government is to ensure that New Zealand does not see the kinds of scenes we see playing out every day on our TV screens: the chaos, confusion and utter despair in European cities and now the United States" Dr Stone said.

"When we don't see these same results here, we shouldn't jump to a conclusion that COVID-19 in Aotearoa is, as Simon Thornley says, 'not the disaster we feared'. It *would have been* without the government action. We averted it through preventative policy. That's public health in action."

Members of the Public Health Association are mindful, however, that New Zealand's Health & Disability System, as well as its Welfare System, were under review as New Zealand went into lockdown. The Health & Disability System Review panel looked at evidence showing health outcomes were inequitable in New Zealand by race, mental health, sexuality and disability. The Welfare Expert Advisory Group saw evidence that New Zealanders seeking income support were not being treated with dignity by our welfare system.

"In a pandemic, this inequity of health outcomes and poor service to New Zealanders needing income support will only be amplified," Dr Stone said, "unless we take action on addressing these inequalities with the same public health approach by our leaders."

Dr Stone said the Public Health experts among the PHA's membership acknowledged that elimination of the COVID-19 virus may not be possible globally, unless and until a vaccine is discovered and distributed everywhere. Elimination within New Zealand should however be possible before any global end-point, provided that the present level of public health action is maintained and combined with effective longterm border protections.

"On both fronts, national and global, the public health approach is necessary to not only prevent the disease spreading, but eliminate it one day altogether," said Dr Stone. "New Zealand must ensure it can import a vaccine, if and when one is developed, with an equitable distribution programme to

implement its supply here in Aotearoa. If there are roadblocks to either, government should clear them now. That's more public health action to come that is clearly necessary."

The Public Health Association's Asian Caucus Chair Dr Lifeng Zhou hopes the public remains assured of the measures being taken by government and follows the appropriate code of the Alert Level government makes official throughout this pandemic. New Zealand's approach is being heralded internationally as a best case scenario and example of the Public Health framework being applied by decision makers.

"We all need to draw on our common humanity and be explicit about our values. Recognising this will help us make good decisions in difficult situations so that, for example, the need to impose restrictive measures and to protect ourselves does not conflict with fairness, respect, and neighbourliness" Dr Lifeng Zhou said.

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