

7 July 2020

Simon Thornley

By email: [fyi-request-13127-d22c5fd7@requests.fyi.org.nz](mailto:fyi-request-13127-d22c5fd7@requests.fyi.org.nz)  
Ref: H202004720

Dear Simon Thornley

### Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) on 23 June 2020 for:

*"There have been several media stories of serology testing of New Zealanders starting in New Zealand.*

*Here is one for example:*

*<https://scanmail.trustwave.com/?c=15517&d=m57x3kfZba9gTc8a9nN-6c5aCKIbXAgqY9RI4aDcEQ&u=https%3a%2f%2fwww%2estuff%2eco%2enz%2fnational%2fhealth%2fcoronavirus%2f300023528%2fcoronavirus-new-antibody-test-to-check-for-undetected-cases-in-southern-region>*

*I also hear that ESR is undertaking serology testing.*

*I believe it is essential that New Zealanders are informed of these results. Please provide aggregated results of serology tests for Covid-19 by age, gender, ethnicity and region. I would also like to know how individuals came to be sampled. As New Zealand makes decisions about the border, this information will be very important to guide decision making. If there has been any testing of cell mediated responses to Covid-19, I would like to know the results of this testing also."*

There is only one independent seroprevalence study currently being undertaken which we are aware of and it is performed by Southern District Health Board (DHB) researchers. Currently, there are no Ministry sanctioned seroprevalence studies being performed. Positive COVID-19 cases from the Southern DHB study will be confirmed on a second assay to increase the positive predictive value.

A recent Nature Medicine letter found that 40 per cent of asymptomatic individuals became seronegative and 12.9 per cent of the symptomatic group became negative for IgG in the early convalescent phase (<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0965-6>). Consequently, seroprevalence studies may not give an accurate reflection of the true prevalence of COVID-19 in New Zealand and future studies will have to learn from the Southern DHB study and adapt its methodology accordingly.

The Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) and some other diagnostic laboratories are undertaking serological assay validations. This is so that the post marketing performance (sensitivity and specificity) of the assays can be independently verified and diagnostic serology testing services can be rolled out.

ESR has also applied for ethical approval to approach COVID-19 survivors to provide convalescent serum to assist in these validations. This is not a seroprevalence study. No additional historic COVID-19 cases have yet been identified by means of serology and notified to ESR.

There are therefore no aggregated results which we can provide to you. As such, your request for the aggregated results of serology tests for COVID-19 by age, gender, ethnicity and region is refused under section 18(g) of the Act, as the information is not held by the Ministry and is not believed to be held by another agency subject to the Act.

The University of Otago has been collecting some peripheral blood mononuclear cells to perform future cell mediated response testing as part of a research project however, we are not aware of any of their results. There may be other research on this front being undertaken by universities, but we are unable to comment. You may wish to approach the University of Otago directly for this information.

I trust this information fulfils your request. Under section 28(3) of the Act you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to review any decisions made under this request.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Ministry website.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Kelley', followed by a small horizontal line.

Jane Kelley  
**Director**  
**COVID-19 Health System Response**