

19 March 2021

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Ryan Potts

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Ref: H202101844

Dear Ryan Potts

### **Response to your request for official information**

Thank you for your two requests under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) on 24 and 25 February 2021 regarding undetected community transmission documentation and two locally acquired cases of COVID-19 on 23 March 2020. On 24 February 2021, Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response transferred a similar request under section 14 of the Act. All three requests have been consolidated into one response in accordance with section 18(A) of the Act.

Information in response to each part of your request is as follows.

*“Please disclose any advice and reports to the Director-General concerning the possibility of undetected community transmission of Covid-19 in New Zealand since February 2020. Provide any advice and reports concerning the possibility of undetected community transmission of Covid-19 in New Zealand.”*

*“Any advice and reports concerning the possibility of undetected community transmission of Covid-19 in New Zealand.”*

The Ministry has been unable to identify any documentation within the scope of this part of your request. Your request is therefore refused under section 18(e) of the Act, as the information does not exist.

*“Please disclose the findings of any genomic sequencing undertaken on the two cases of locally acquired Covid-19 reported by the Director-General on 23 March 2020. Please also advise if these cases were linked. If the source of infection could not be identified, please comment on whether the Ministry considers this evidence that the first community cases in New Zealand were the result of undetected transmission.”*

Information in response to the remainder of your request was provided by the Institute of Environmental Science and Research.

The Wairarapa case yielded a partial genome and is classified as a B lineage. The Auckland case yielded a genome and was classified as a B.1.197 lineage. Since the Wairarapa case did not yield a complete genome and the Auckland case did, it is therefore impossible to determine whether or not the two cases are linked.

*“On 23 March 2020, the Director-General confirmed two locally acquired cases of Covid-*

*19 in Auckland and the Wairarapa. I request the following information: Was there an epidemiological link between these two cases? If so, please disclose further details.”*

No epidemiological link with known cases has been established for either of the two cases.

*“Has genomic sequencing been undertaken to establish the source(s) of these infections? If so, please disclose the findings. If no link to other cases was established, does the Ministry view this as evidence of undetected community transmission; and if not, why not?”*

Whole genome sequencing was not performed on all cases of COVID-19 detected in New Zealand in the early stages of the pandemic, so a lack of genomic link to another case does not rule out the possibility that other genomically similar cases were present.

The case definition is reviewed regularly and at the time these cases were detected, individuals who were being prioritised for testing were those with a fever of more than 38°C or any acute respiratory infection with at least one of the following symptoms: shortness of breath, cough or sore throat with or without fever.

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. The Ombudsman may be contacted by email at: [xxxx@xxxxxxxxx.xxxxxxxxxx.xx](mailto:xxxx@xxxxxxxxx.xxxxxxxxxx.xx) or by calling 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Ministry website at: [www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests](http://www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests).

Yours sincerely



Dom Harris  
**Manager Office of the Deputy Chief Executive  
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