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Chris McCashin

By email: fyi-request-21768-59a3884d@requests.fyi.org.nz
Ref: H2023019972

Tēnā koe Chris

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to Manatū Hauora (the Ministry of Health) on 8 February 2023 for information regarding COVID-19 deaths. Please find a response to each part of your request below.

Given the Ministry of Health previously allocated a gunshot death to the Covid-19 death statistics is the Ministry of Health confident that they have an accurate data set attributing deaths to Covid-19?

The death you referred to occurred in 2021. At the time, COVID-19 death reporting was primarily focused on ensuring that the deaths of all people who had tested positive for COVID-19 were reported. This earlier version of death reporting did not include cause of death so did not “attribute” any deaths to COVID-19. The “deaths attributed to COVID-19” metric was developed in mid-2022 after an expedited process for mortality coding of deaths of people who had COVID-19 was set up, along with associated reporting systems.

Process documents, sequence of events, pathology tests, any and all tests done to determine that the deceased should be classed as a death attributed to Covid-19

Cause of death certificates are completed for all deaths within New Zealand. These are usually completed by the medical practitioner who attended the patient before they died. This happens for around 90% of deaths while the remaining 10% (usually sudden and unexpected deaths) are referred to the coroner.

Once cause of death certificates or coroner’s findings documents are completed, they are made available to a specialised team of mortality clinical coders within Te Whatu Ora (Health New Zealand). The clinical coders review these documents and determine which cause of death is the underlying cause and which cause(s) are contributory. This assignment of clinical codes is aligned with the World Health Organization’s (WHO) international standards for mortality coding: https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/classification/icd/covid-19/guidelines-cause-of-death-covid-19-20200420-en.pdf?sfvrsn=35fdd864_2&download=true.

Average time taken for the deceased to be classified as a death attributed to Covid-19, eg from the time they die to when they are added to the statistical dataset

Most deaths take around a week from their date of death to be coded, however this can take months or years for deaths that are referred to the coroner. As at 6 March 2023, 84% of the deaths for February 2023 have already been coded. For a more complete look at how many deaths have been coded, I refer you to the table below. This information is also available on Ministry’s website under the section “Deaths with COVID-19” at: www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-current-cases. Around 12% of the announced deaths with COVID-19 are yet to be coded.

Deaths with COVID-19

Cause of death	Died within 28 days of positive test	Died more than 28 days after positive test	Total	Change in the last week
COVID as underlying	1575	36	1611	6
COVID as contributory	907	30	937	0
COVID-attributed total	2482	66	2548	6
Not COVID	969	0*	969	4
Not available	471	22	493	8
Total	3922	88	4010	18*

The Medsafe report states that deaths are removed from the dataset if a person dies after 28 days from a positive test and the death subsequently turns out to be unrelated to Covid-19. Based on that information can you confirm the timeframe. How long is it after a positive Covid-19 test are persons automatically put into the death attributed to Covid-19? 40 days? 50 days? 60 days? 70 days? One year?

Deaths are not automatically attributed to COVID-19. The main way that deaths with COVID-19 get included in the announced death total (4010 in the table above) is if the death has occurred within 28 days of a positive test. Deaths are only “attributed to COVID” if the Mortality Coding team have classified COVID-19 to be an underlying or contributory cause of death. Some deaths that occurred more than 28 days after a positive test can be included in the announced death total on a provisional basis. This occurs if there is some indication from a medical professional in the case record form that COVID-19 may have been involved in the death. This is currently the case for 22 deaths. If the Mortality Coding team subsequently determine that COVID-19 did not contribute to the person’s death, then they are removed from this total.

If a person does die and is automatically put into the category above what is the average time taken for the death to be determined and either added / kept in / or removed from the dataset?

I refer you to the above answer for the time for a death to be categorised in general. The timeframes for the deaths that are removed from this category are not collated as part of regular reporting. Therefore, your request is refused under section 18(g)(i) as the information is not held by the Ministry.

Can you also provide total number of influenza deaths 2000 - 2022 per month and also total number of Covid deaths last few years per month?

Appended to this letter is the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 for each month since the start of the pandemic. Please note, the months not listed in the document means there was no

deaths as a direct result of COVID-19. Furthermore, due to the small number of deaths that occurred in some of the months listed, the figures have been suppressed (.S) due to privacy reasons under section 9(2)(a) of the Act, to protect the privacy of natural person, including the deceased natural person.

Information relating to the total number of influenza deaths is not held by the Ministry. However, you may wish to request this information from Te Whatu Ora. Please note, the data for influenza deaths for the most recent years is unlikely to be available yet, so you may wish to request this information at a later date. To submit an OIA request to Te Whatu Ora email: hNZoia@health.govt.nz

In conclusion can the Ministry of Health confirm they can accurately determine a death attributed to Covid, do this in a timely manner, complete all the PM analysis (if any) and be confident that the person died from Covid 100% and have all the tools / information to do so? And if there is any doubt is it Ministry of Health policy to include it as a death from Covid as best practice? Or can the Ministry of Health as noted above 100% confirm the cause of death?

Manatū Hauora practices align with the WHO's standards on mortality coding and deaths are only attributed to COVID-19 if all necessary criteria are fulfilled following the processes outlined above.

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: info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or by calling 0800 802 602.

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

Nāku noa, nā



Dr Andrew Old
Deputy Director-General
Public Health Agency | Te Pou Hauora Tūmatanui

Month	Number of deaths attributed to COVID-19
March 2020	.S
April 2020	18
May 2020	.S
September 2020	.S
January 2021	.S
February 2021	.S
September 2021	.S
October 2021	.S
November 2021	13
December 2021	6
January 2022	6
February 2022	15
March 2022	280
April 2022	291
May 2022	236
June 2022	247
July 2022	526
August 2022	328
September 2022	95
October 2022	58
November 2022	124
December 2022	150
January 2023	105
February 2023	37
March 2023	.S

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