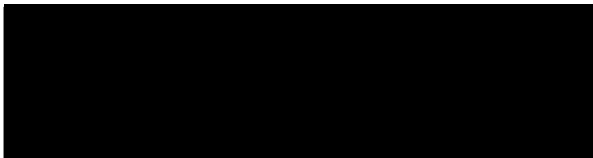




Hospital Services

North Shore Hospital Campus
Shakespeare Road, Takapuna
Private Bag 93-503, Takapuna
Auckland 0740
Telephone: 09 489 0527
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12 December 2019



Dear [REDACTED]

Re: OIA request – Patient deaths attributed to influenza

Thank you for your Official Information Act request received 20 November 2019 seeking information from Waitematā District Health Board (DHB) about hospital-acquired influenza.

Before responding to your specific questions, it may be useful to provide some context about our services.

Waitematā DHB serves a population of more than 630,000 across the North Shore, Waitakere and Rodney areas, the largest and one of the most rapidly growing DHBs in the country. We are the largest employer in the district, employing around 7,500 people across more than 80 different locations.

In addition to providing services to our own population, we are also the metropolitan Auckland provider of forensic psychiatry, child disability services, child community dental services and community alcohol and drug services.

Waitematā DHB has a robust approach to managing patients with suspected or confirmed influenza. This includes strict adherence to our influenza policy, early testing, managing and treating patients promptly, prevention of spread and vaccinations, which are offered free to patients.

The Infection Prevention and Control Team (IPCT) reviews the management aspects of such patients to ensure that appropriate precautions are taken by both patients and healthcare workers to prevent and control the spread of influenza in the hospital setting. This is done through education, signage on many aspects of prevention (including hand hygiene), and patient and visitor information (see attached **Appendix 1**).

Waitematā DHB's influenza surveillance strategy specifically categorises inpatients who develop influenza symptoms on or after their third day of admission as hospital-acquired (HA-Inf). It is important to be aware that acquisition of influenza whilst in hospital can occur from any number of sources including visitors, staff and other patients.

In addition, we know that up to 80 per cent of those infected are asymptomatic (i.e. without symptoms or signs of respiratory tract infection). An asymptomatic carrier can expose their family, co-workers and patients to the influenza virus without knowing.

Waitematā DHB staff are strongly encouraged to receive an annual influenza vaccination to prevent transmission of the virus within healthcare facilities to patients and other staff, as well as to their family and friends. Our work in reducing the numbers of influenza cases, including those classified as hospital-acquired, is of critical importance to Waitematā DHB.

In response to your specific questions we can provide the following information:

This year's meeting minutes show that flu is thought to have contributed to the deaths of five patients - are any of these patients in the group that acquired flu in hospital?

The minutes I'm referring to are here:

<https://www.waitematadhb.govt.nz/assets/Documents/board/2019/Open-HAC-Oct-2019.pdf>.*

They say:

"The impact of influenza illness in the elderly patient population remains under-appreciated; to date we have identified five patients who have died in hospital with HA Influenza A diagnosed within 10 days prior to death. While influenza may not be the only contributor to their demise, it likely contributed significantly to the deterioration of their health."

*Clarification: the above was actually reported in the July 2019 Hospital Advisory Committee (HAC) minutes:

<http://www.waitematadhb.govt.nz/assets/Documents/board/2019/HAC-Open-Meeting-31.07.19.pdf>

Based on our definition for hospital-acquired influenza (that patients develop symptoms on or after their third day of admission), these five patients acquired influenza whilst in our hospitals that likely contributed to the deterioration of their health. These patients were all elderly and had other conditions that made them highly vulnerable to other illnesses. As stated previously, it is not clear if the source of the infection was from visitors, staff or other patients.

Caution is advised in interpreting this information as Waitematā DHB is able to provide a level of detail other DHBs are unable to. The incidence of hospital-acquired influenza is linked to the prevalence of flu in the wider community and should not be seen as a measure of the care provided in our hospitals.

Further, as you will note from our response to your previous OIA dated 22 October, rates in hospital-acquired influenza in 2019 (from January to September) have been high due to the increased influenza activity in the community and the mutation of the influenza virus.

This assessment was only for part of the year, until July 12, so there may have been further deaths after this. Please interpret my request as covering all deaths where flu was determined to be a factor.

Since 12 July, 2019, Waitematā DHB has not had any additional deaths that were directly attributed to hospital-acquired influenza.

I trust that this information is helpful.

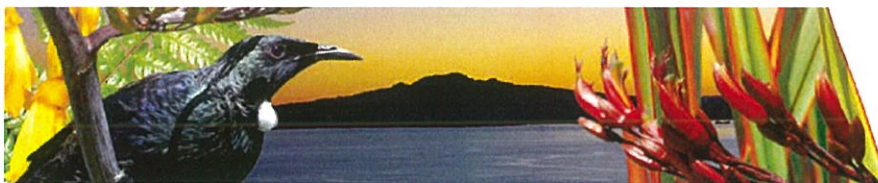
Waitematā DHB supports the open disclosure of information to assist community understanding of how we are delivering publicly funded healthcare. This includes the proactive publication of anonymised Official Information Act responses on our website from 10 working days after they have been released.

If you consider there are good reasons why this response should not be made publicly available, we will be happy to consider your views.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Debbie Holdsworth', with a large loop at the end.

Dr Debbie Holdsworth
Director Hospital Services
Waitematā District Health Board



Influenza – Patient & Visitor Information

What is Influenza (also called Flu)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza virus that infects the nose, throat and sometimes the lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

Signs and symptoms of flu

People who have the flu often feel some or all of these signs and symptoms that usually start suddenly, not gradually:

- Fever or feeling feverish and chills (it is important to note that not everyone with flu will have a fever)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue (very tired)
- Some people may have vomiting and diarrhoea, though this is more common in young children than in adults

How flu spreads

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by tiny droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people that are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their mouth, nose or eyes.

Period of contagiousness

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Although people with the flu are most contagious in the first 3 to 4 days after their illness begins, some otherwise healthy adults may be able to infect others beginning 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others with flu viruses for even longer time.

Onset of symptoms

The time from when a person is exposed to the flu virus and infected to when symptoms begin is about 1 to 4 days, with an average of 2 days.

Complications of flu

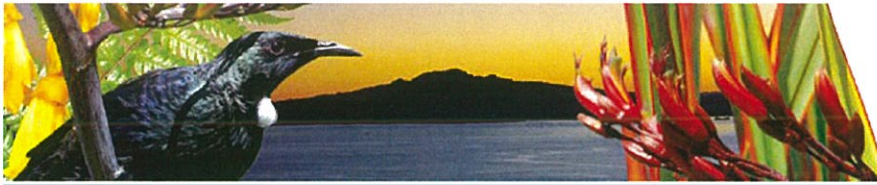
Complications of flu can include bacterial pneumonia, ear infections, sinus infections and worsening of chronic medical conditions such as congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes.

People at high risk of flu

Anyone can get the flu (even healthy people) and serious problems related to the flu can happen at any age, but some people are at high risk of developing serious flu-related complications if they get sick. This

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Influenza – Patient & Visitor Information

includes people 65 years and older, people of any age with certain chronic medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease), pregnant women and young children.

Preventing seasonal flu

The first and most important step in preventing flu is to get a flu vaccination each year. Staying away from people who are sick, covering coughs and sneezes and frequent hand washing are also recommended.

Diagnosing flu

It is very difficult to distinguish the flu from other viral or bacterial causes of respiratory illnesses on the basis of symptoms alone. There are tests available to diagnose flu, which your doctor may request.

What happens if I have flu in hospital?

If you are in a hospital, additional precautions will be used to prevent the spread of influenza to staff and other patients. These may include:

- Healthcare workers wearing a mask whilst providing care to you.
- The curtains around your bed space being closed.

You can help prevent spreading influenza to staff and other patients by:

- Wearing a mask when you are outside your individual bed area e.g. walking in the hospital corridors.
- Coughing and sneezing into tissues (or your elbow if no tissues are available). Please dispose of used tissues into waste bins available.
- Regularly washing your hands with soap and water or using an alcohol based hand rub.

Can I have visitors?

Yes, you can have visitors.

- It is important that your visitors wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand rub before and after visiting you.
- Visitors may also be asked to wear a mask.
- If your visitors are unwell, it is best to ask them to visit you when they are feeling better.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention - Key Facts about Influenza (last update 25 August 2016) available online: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/keyfacts.htm>

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