

Our Islands health systems and the impact of COVID-19

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Just as when Pacific Island countries plan to open borders to international travel after a long closure to contain the spread of COVID-19 to the Pacific, health headlines in most major newspapers from across the globe, including New Zealand, have warned on new large waves of Omicron variants that have seen new surges of infections and deaths.^{1,2,3} Infections with the newer variants of the COVID-19 does not seem to respect antibody production from previous infections and from vaccinations. The BA.5 version is the main variant causing a second wave in the United States and New Zealand, which was first detected in South Africa earlier in the year. The current COVID-19 waves in New Zealand poses a huge risk to the Pacific Island countries (PICs) as most contact with the outside world is via Auckland New Zealand.

Screening for COVID-19 and diagnostic testing in the PICs is opportunistic therefore the number of reported cases and deaths represents a significant undercount. In December 2020, only three PICs had COVID-19 and currently, only Tokelau and Pitcairn Islands have not had reported cases. The number of reported deaths in the PICs (excluding Papua New Guinea) is 2,063⁴ which is lower by rate compared to New Zealand and may be explained by the higher vaccination rates in the PICs and the absence of other more deadlier variants such as the Delta variant.

The greatest risk to PICs from the COVID-19 is the resumption of international travel, the waning immunity from vaccines and the absence of booster shots. There is a reluctance however from PICs and New Zealand to prolong border closures due to significant economic impact affecting commerce and communities. All PICs that are dependent on the tourist trade such as Fiji, Cook Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa have had declining economies as measured by the Gross Domestic Product in the last two years. This translates to increasing poverty amongst communities who have learnt to build resilience through increasing agricultural activity and relying on remittances from overseas.

The pandemic has also caused negative impacts on the health sector. Health systems have been overwhelmed with many governments struggling to maintain essential services and other vaccination programmes leading to increased negative health outcomes.⁵ There is no data from PICs to measure the impact of the pandemic on health although it can be presumed from experience elsewhere that the vulnerable groups such as women and the poor would have been disproportionately affected. Funding for the COVID-19 vaccines and personal protection medical supplies from development partners have assisted PICs in sustaining the necessary health spend during the pandemic.⁶ Utilisation and engagement of all health providers for a whole-of-country was not done well in most PICs including Samoa with requests from the doctors in the private sector to be engaged in assisting the government with the delivery of primary health care.⁷

Whereas there is much research and commentary in New Zealand about the effects of the pandemic on Pacific population and health providers, sadly, there has been no such efforts in the PICs. Relevant research may inform border reopening decisions and screening policies. This Journal has not received a manuscript on COVID-19 other than the editorials urging action in prevention. Technical guidance from the World Health Organization has assisted greatly in understanding the pandemic and preventative measures. Actions by the international agency to secure partnerships to form the COVAX facility has benefited the region with the ready supply of COVID-19 vaccines.

So what should PICs look forward to in the next twelve months? The reopening of Fiji's borders in December 2021 has seen the return of 1200 tourists daily with an immediate benefit to the economy.

The only requirements in a pre-departure check list are: a Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) in country, proof of vaccination and travel insurance.⁸ The economic imperative to restart growth and jobs will challenge any notions of further restrictions and competition for the tourist dollar is enticing. It is very possible that another surge in infection numbers may occur in the PICs with open borders placing a challenge on health providers and systems.

With the surge of COVID-19 and the presence of Monkeypox in New Zealand and Australia, PICs need to be more vigilant at the borders. A few travellers to Samoa with negative RATs in New Zealand the day before having been found to be positive on arrival. Therefore, repeat RATs within a week of arrival may be needed. Promotion of face mask wearing in public places should and other public health measures to reduce transmission should continue. As Pacific leaders deliberate at the Pacific Forum meeting this week, they need to make concerted and collective effort at activating enablers that will safeguard health systems and promote healthy outcomes in the region.

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