

Update from the Ministry of Health on two COVID-19 cases and vaccination targets

8 November 2021

The Vanuatu Ministry of Health would like to provide an update to the public on the two active COVID-19 cases currently in isolation. The two active cases entered Vanuatu from New Caledonia on Friday 22 October and were detected as positive on Sunday 24 October. Both active cases have been transferred to the COVID-19 isolation ward at Vila Central Hospital.

We have now received the test results from Doherty Institute in Australia on the variant of COVID-19 for these two cases imported from New Caledonia. This has indicated that the COVID-19 variant is delta. This is not cause for alarm but does send a warning that we must ensure the strictest standard is applied for all measures. The measures currently in place must be continued so as to protect against any onwards transmission of delta variant from these two cases. At this stage, no additional measures are required or recommended by the Ministry of Health. We should have confidence that the work done to strengthen our processes is sufficient. We should also continue to vaccinate, as this is the best protection against COVID-19 including the delta variant.

None of the 16 other passengers from the same flight from New Caledonia have developed symptoms of COVID-19. They were tested at day 1, day 5 and day 11 with an extra test at day 14. All of the laboratory tests for these 16 passengers have come back negative. They were provided medical clearance to confirm they are no risk of COVID-19 to the community and yesterday all 16 were released from quarantine.

Additional contact tracing for the two active cases has now been completed. Contact tracing indicates there is no evidence of breaches in quarantine procedures. 20 other people were placed in quarantine as a precautionary measure while the contact tracing process was conducted. These included frontline workers at the border, transport staff and health staff. Negative test results have been received for all 20 of these people. Last week they were all released from precautionary quarantine as they were confirmed to pose no risk of COVID-19 to the community.

There is no evidence of any additional COVID-19 cases in Vanuatu. There is no indication of any risk of COVID-19 transmission in the community. In accordance with the Vanuatu Outbreak Alert System, Efate and Offshore Islands remain at Level 1: Medium risk due to the cases at the border that have been contained in quarantine and isolation. The rest of Vanuatu remains at Level 0: Low risk. As a result, the Ministry of Health do not currently recommend any broad-scale community lockdowns or restrictions.

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So far, we have managed to successfully contain at the border all COVID-19 cases imported into the country. However, repatriation of Vanuatu citizens is an important priority of the Government of Vanuatu. Repatriation has an associated risk of imported cases, but this risk can be reduced by strict measures such as quarantine. Vaccination further reduces the risk that any cases will be severe, will require hospitalization, or will lead death. Progress with COVID-19 vaccination roll-out has been good but we need to keep going. Shefa province was the first to start vaccination in early June this year. Efate and Offshore Islands had reached 81% of the adult population with one dose and 51% with two doses. For Sanma, 81% of the adult population in high priority areas had received their first dose. While only 18% have received their second dose, we expect this will rapidly increase in the coming weeks. Both Tafea and Malampa have already vaccinated over a third of their adults in high priority areas with one dose. Penama just commenced vaccination last Tuesday and was able to vaccinate 8% of their population with one dose. Torba will launch their COVID-19 vaccination roll-out on 9 November. Updated vaccination figures are provided weekly, on Tuesdays.

Vaccination is critical to prevent community transmission and to prevent a heavy impact of COVID-19 on hospital capacity. The vaccination campaign has been targeting health care workers, frontline workers, the elderly 55 years and over, and people with underlying conditions. Coverage of health care and frontline workers is progressing very well, and we encourage all those not yet vaccinated to come forward as they are the ones most at risk of contracting COVID-19 by nature of their work. Vaccination rates for the elderly are unfortunately lagging behind. It is so important that this group gets vaccinated as we have seen from reports all over the world that this is the group who will be hardest hit if COVID-19 does reach our community. These are the most vulnerable who are more likely to develop severe COVID, require hospitalization and are at higher risk of death. We urge you all to encourage your older family and loved ones to come forward to receive a vaccine. Please assist them in this, to protect them from COVID-19.

As our vaccination coverage rates increase throughout the country, we are getting ready for a return to the new normal through the reduction of international border restrictions and opening to tourists and other travellers. It is important that we continue to prepare while we are still in a situation where there is no COVID-19 in the country. Part of this preparation is to ensure we receive the COVID-19 vaccine to help protect ourselves, our family, community, and the future of the nation, as a whole.

The Ministry of Health would like to inform the public that a new national COVID-19 vaccination target has been proposed by the Health Emergency Advisory Committee that will help to guide this opening. This target set is for:

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- 90% coverage of the adult population with at least one dose of vaccine by the end of 2021, AND
- 70% of the adult population fully vaccinated which is two doses of the current vaccines in Vanuatu by the end of March 2022.

As we continue to monitor the evolving global and regional situation of COVID-19, these targets may be adjusted to ensure that our population remains safe. The Ministry of Health wish to commend the professionalism and dedication of all frontline workers supporting repatriation and quarantine operations that has led to successful containment of these cases in quarantine and isolation, and commends those who have selflessly worked towards ensuring that we have no cases in the community. The Ministry of Health continues to urge all those who are not yet vaccinated to come forward. **COVID-19 vaccination protects against severe disease, hospitalization and death from COVID-19. Protect yourself, your family and your community from COVID-19 and get vaccinated.**

For recent updates, please refer to the Ministry of Health COVID-19 website at www.covid19.gov.vu. Please also follow the Health Promotions Vanuatu Facebook Page. For any questions, please call the 119 Health Information Hotline. Any updates on the COVID-19 situation will be provided through official sources and the public are urged not to spread any false or misleading information.