

27 January 2021

Dame Dr Karen Poutasi  
Chair COVID-19 Immunisation Programme Governance Group  
C/- Waikato DHB  
Private Bag 3200  
HAMILTON

By email to: karen.poutasi@waikatodhb.health.nz

Tēnā Koe Dame Dr Poutasi

**Re: People living with severe mental illness and COVID-19 vaccination prioritisation**

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) recognises the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the initiatives that were introduced to protect the people of Aotearoa and those agencies working with people who may potentially have COVID-19.

We note that it is the Government's intention to vaccinate the general population in the second half of 2021<sup>1</sup> and we strongly advocate that vaccination roll-out plans prioritise people with serious mental illness<sup>2</sup> as a priority group. People living with serious mental illness, include schizophrenia and other psychoses, anxiety and depression in their severe states. Although they are a small proportion of the New Zealand population, they are a highly vulnerable one.<sup>i</sup>

There is growing evidence that people with serious mental illness have an increased risk of being infected by COVID-19, and also have higher subsequent rates of hospitalisation, morbidity and mortality.<sup>ii iii</sup> People living with serious mental illness are more likely to have diabetes, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, be smokers and overweight.<sup>iv</sup> There are also structural barriers facing people with serious mental illness in accessing vaccinations e.g. the practicability of enrolling them in a vaccination programme<sup>v</sup>. Māori and Pacific people with serious mental illness often experience several co-morbidities placing them at greater risk of having serious outcomes from COVID-19. It is well documented that people with serious mental health have a lower life expectancy than the general population due to their co-morbidities and as such must be considered a priority group for COVID-19 vaccination.<sup>vi vii</sup>

The RANZCP recognises that people with severe mental illness have less uptake of vaccinations due to access, awareness of services and other complex issues. The RANZCP recommends that the DHBs and primary care organisations are closely involved in ensuring this vulnerable population is provided with options to receive the vaccination in a timely way.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Two new vaccines secured, enough for every New Zealander' joint media release from Rt. Hon. Jacinda Ardern, Hon. Megan Woods, Hon. Chris Hipkins and Hon. Andrew Little, 17 December 2020. Available at <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/two-new-vaccines-secured-enough-every-new-zealander>

The RANZCP would welcome an opportunity to work with you regarding communicating with consumers and their whānau regarding the benefits of vaccination.

The RANZCP acknowledges our role in improving the mental and physical health of people with serious mental illness and is willing to be involved in facilitating the increased uptake of vaccinations with consumers.

If you require further information regarding this letter, please contact the RANZCP's New Zealand Manager, Rosemary Matthews, who supports Tu Te Akaaka Roa (the New Zealand National Committee). Rosemary can be contacted on 04 472 7265 or by email at [Rosemary.Matthews@ranzcp.org](mailto:Rosemary.Matthews@ranzcp.org).

Nāku noa, nā



Dr Mark Lawrence  
**Chair, Tu Te Akaaka Roa - New Zealand National Committee**

CC Professor Ian Town  
Hon Chris Hipkins

## References

- 
- <sup>i</sup> The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. The economic cost of serious mental illness and comorbidities in Australia and New Zealand.2016. Available at <https://www.ranzcp.org/files/resources/reports/ranzcp-serious-mental-illness.aspx>
- <sup>ii</sup> Wang Q, Xu R, Volkow ND. Increased risk of COVID-19 infection and mortality in people with mental disorders: analysis from electronic health records in the United States. *World Psychiatry*. 2020
- <sup>iii</sup> Li L, Li F, Fortunati F, Krystal JH. Association of a prior psychiatric diagnosis with mortality among hospitalized patients with Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Infection. *JAMA network open*. 2020;3(9):e2023282-e
- <sup>iv</sup> The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. Keeping body and mind together. 2015. Available at <https://www.ranzcp.org/files/resources/reports/keeping-body-and-mind-together.aspx>
- <sup>v</sup> Warren N, Kisely S, Siskind D. Maximizing the Uptake of a COVID-19 Vaccine in People with Severe Mental Illness: A Public Health Priority. *JAMA psychiatry*. 2020
- <sup>vi</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>vii</sup> The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. The economic cost of serious mental illness and comorbidities in Australia and New Zealand.2016. Available at <https://www.ranzcp.org/files/resources/reports/ranzcp-serious-mental-illness.aspx>