

Learning from COVID-19 to prepare for the next pandemic

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Credit: Alix Campbell

Aotearoa New Zealand's next pandemic plan needs a completely different approach to our previous plan that was focussed on influenza, say researchers from the University of Otago, Wellington in a new article that identifies key lessons for managing future major outbreaks and pandemics.

In the article, "How Aotearoa New Zealand rapidly revised its COVID-19 response [strategy](#): lessons for the next [pandemic](#) plan," published online today in the *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, epidemiologists Dr. Amanda Kvalsvig and Professor Michael Baker describe what a new pandemic plan could look like and how it would differ from past versions.

"The paper takes a systematic look at the steps involved in developing and then delivering a pandemic strategy," said lead author Dr. Kvalsvig. "It's about having a strategy that can be adapted to work for the pandemic you have, which may not be the pandemic you were expecting. We've seen other countries flounder because they were stuck with an influenza model that wasn't suitable for the

current pandemic, and [decision-makers](#) were unable or unwilling to change direction. In particular, Western countries appeared unable to learn from the experience of the Asia-Pacific region which rapidly contained and eliminated the pandemic by treating it more like SARS."

Co-author Professor Baker noted that New Zealand's elimination strategy has been a success but it was much more difficult and expensive to deliver than it needed to be because so much vital infrastructure was lacking when the pandemic arrived.

"Even with an improved pandemic plan, we still need a [public health system](#) to ensure it is regularly updated, adapted and rapidly implemented when needed. New Zealand needs to invest in essential public health systems now to continue delivering our successful pandemic response and to build long term capacity. A key component is a dedicated public health agency."

A major public health challenge that this paper aims to support is the need to develop an effective and equitable strategy in a rapidly-evolving outbreak situation with many unknowns. As a pandemic evolves, the response will need to evolve along with it. For example, a key decision at the moment is how the vaccine rollout will be integrated into New Zealand's elimination strategy over the next 1-2 years.

"The specifics of the response will change over time" said Dr. Kvalsvig, "But the values and the epidemiology principles are consistent. We need a strong commitment to [population health](#), supported by a diverse and well-resourced workforce, to ensure that we're ready to respond effectively to any public health emergency."

More information: Amanda Kvalsvig et al. How Aotearoa New Zealand rapidly revised its Covid-19 response strategy: lessons for the next pandemic

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