Business Leaders' Health & Safety Forum

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HEALTH CRISIS MANAGEMENT • OPERATIONS

Cutting through the Omicron noise

Expert advice and tactics for business leaders and directors

Following several virtual events with Dr Ian Norton from Respond Global, the Forum has collated some top tactics for organisations, business leaders and directors to deploy to as we prepare to enter the Government's Phase Three of the Omicron response.

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"You need to prepare for 25-30% of your workforce to be affected every month by Covid over the coming weeks – this includes those sick, but also those who are a close contact or have a close contact in their family"

Dr Norton.

The four S's

In his former role at the World Health Organisation, Dr Norton led the response to outbreaks of Ebola, Measles and Diphtheria. He believes utilising what he calls the four S's in your response will hold you in good stead. These are:

- **Staffing issues** – do you have the right people in place, who are trained in what to do?
- **Supply** – do you have what you need in terms of supply of PPE, cleaning materials etc?
- **Space** – what does your work area flow look like? How are you managing different groups on the shop floor?
- **Systems** – what are your reporting systems for contact tracing so you can safely conduct business?

The 40/70 rule

Adapted from former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Dr Norton explains that leaders need to employ this tactic when making decisions. If you're making decisions based on 40% of the available information, you are making them too soon and not taking enough time to consider the risks; whereas if you're making decisions after you've got 70% of the available information, you're making decisions too late – and need to act on decisions, such as ordering more rapid antigen tests (RATs) sooner.

Practice makes perfect

While your organisation may have an extremely competent 'plan' in place for when large sections of your workforce are unable to come to work, have you practiced what that will look like in reality? Dr Norton suggests we should all be running practice sessions at our worksites, running through real-life scenarios of an employee testing positive, and how you will run contact tracing to manage your own outbreak.

RATs

As more businesses gear up to use RATs, Dr Norton has suggested a few key tactics:

- The incubation period for Omicron is three days, so you need to be using RATs for employees 2-3 times a week. Once a week won't work with this strain of Covid.
- If you don't have enough to supply to all your workers and their families to support them to manage outbreaks at home, focus on key parts of your business and especially if anyone in your workforce will have contact with vulnerable people through their work (and home, if possible).
- If a worker has symptoms, but tests negative on the RAT ensure your policy outlines that they should still stay at home while their symptoms are present, and encourage them to test again in 2-3 days.

Dr Norton also advises from experience in Australia that the worldwide supply chain of RATs is opening up slowly, so New Zealand organisations can expect to have more access to testing kits, and to better quality supplies also.

Practical tactics for the workplace

- Encourage people to stay home if they're sick – this includes senior staff and leaders modelling this behaviour for others. Supporting your employees with sick leave is one way to encourage this.
- If you have a large contractor workforce, they may be more likely to come to work if they're unwell due to a lack of sick leave provisions. Consider how you can incentivise these people to stay home if they're unwell.
- While putting groups of employees into cohorts or bubbles worked well previously, as case numbers grow this will become less successful. This is largely due to the number of people becoming infected **outside** of work – no matter how hard you try to separate groups at work, they will go home and mix with their families and communities where they are more exposed.

Will this ever end?

Dr Norton outlines three major routes Covid could take us to from here, they are:

1. Over time, likely years, Covid-19 will move towards becoming a common cold, i.e., highly infectious but with much less severity.
2. We will experience a number of new Covid variants but they will remain less severe, and we will see waves of very bad flu over the coming 18-24 months. This will come in epidemics (waves of infection), not pandemics (affecting the whole world at once), i.e., will be seasonal across the world, much like the flu. **Dr Norton believes this is the most likely scenario.**
3. There is still a 5-10% chance that we will reset to March 2020 and see a new Covid variant emerge that will bypass natural immunity and vaccination. This is a risk in the third world where there is a much lower vaccination rate, and where variants have a greater opportunity to mutate, but would quickly spread and reignite the 'pandemic' stage.

Omicron is a less severe strain of Covid-19, and as such organisations need to act appropriately to the risk. Management teams and Boards also need to be flexible in their approach; keep tweaking it as new information emerges. As cases eventually start to decline, it will be appropriate to loosen restrictions. Particularly if we are to face different variants in future – Dr Norton advises you should aim to use this opportunity to ease restrictions and communicate when and why they would return, so everyone remains prepared, but not fatigued.

Boards and their role

Boards will also have a role to play in the coming months in supporting their CEOs and leadership teams in 'doing the right thing' to support sustainable success across New Zealand. This includes ensuring organisations aren't hoarding supplies, e.g., RATs, and considering a broad approach to wellbeing that moves beyond just their employees, but also considers contractors and those working in their supply chain – who play a large role in keeping the country moving.

One question to leave senior leaders and Boards with to consider now, is **how will our organisation emerge after this outbreak?**

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