

19 May 2023

K Thompson

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Tēnā koe,

**Official information request HNZ00017493**

Thank you for your email on 8 May 2023, asking for the following which has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act). Please see outlined below a response to your request.

*Please can you inform us how it was determined that 29 people in New Zealand had died of Covid (delta variant) in 2020, 2021 and early 2022, as was reported in May 2022, instead of the earlier reported 52 deaths from Covid (as was reported for example in March 2022).*

*Was this over-counting of Covid delta deaths due to wrong diagnosis, and, if so, how was this misdiagnosis determined after the deaths had occurred, at a later date (circa May 2022)? Presumably the over-counting of Covid deaths could not be determined by autopsy?*

The apparent anomaly you are seeing is the result of data upgrades carried out in 2022 and explained in full below.

Reporting on COVID-19 deaths has many complexities and limitations. Over the course of the pandemic, the main metric tracking COVID-19 deaths has shifted from deaths 'with COVID-19' to deaths 'from COVID-19'.

In the early days of the pandemic, COVID-19 death reporting was based on an individual's death that occurred within 28 days of a positive case being uploaded. This equates to the measure 'deaths with COVID-19'. This is a metric that was easy to calculate from data that was readily available at the time (positive test date and death date).

Developing a 'deaths from COVID-19' metric required substantial time and work. Cause of death is coded by a specialised team within Te Whatu Ora/Health NZ, usually at a significant time lag after the event of the death. COVID-19 deaths have been fast-tracked for coding where possible, and a project was stood up to link COVID case data with cause of death data.

Completed in mid-2022, this project enabled us to identify whether COVID-19 played a role in the death of a person, or whether their COVID-19 infection was purely incidental. Deaths of people 'with COVID-19' are now assigned into one of 4 categories.

1. COVID-19 as underlying
2. COVID-19 as contributory
3. Not COVID-19 (i.e. the person had COVID-19 at the time of death, but it didn't contribute to their death)
4. Not available

The 'COVID-19 as underlying' and 'COVID-19 as contributory' categories are often combined into a single total, which we label interchangeably as 'COVID-19 attributed deaths' or 'deaths from COVID-19'. This metric provides a better illustration of the impact of COVID-19 on New Zealand than the original 'deaths within 28 days of positive test' metric originally reported. Consequently, the move to reporting 'deaths from COVID-19' is the reason by the figures on the website dropped between the dates listed in your question.

### **How to get in touch**

If you have any questions, you can contact us at [h.nz.OIA@health.govt.nz](mailto:h.nz.OIA@health.govt.nz).

If you are not happy with this response, you have the right to make a complaint to the Ombudsman. Information about how to do this is available at [www.ombudsman.parliament.nz](http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz) or by phoning 0800 802 602.

As this information may be of interest to other members of the public, Te Whatu Ora may proactively release a copy of this response on our website. All requester data, including your name and contact details, will be removed prior to release.

Nāku iti noa, nā



Daniel Hirst  
**Acting Director**  
**Intelligence Directorate, National Public Health Service**