

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Prof Sir Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD) 78/2021

FOR ACTION

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/Health and Social
Care Board/HSC Trusts/ NIAS

GP Medical Advisers, Health & Social Care Board

All General Practitioners and GP Locums (for onward
distribution to practice staff)

OOHs Medical Managers (for onward distribution to staff)

Independent sector providers via the Regulation, Quality and
Improvement Authority

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SQ

Tel: 028 9052 0563

Email: Michael.McBride@health-ni.gov.uk

Our Ref: HSS(MD) 78/2021

Date: 26 November 2021

PLEASE SEE ATTACHED FULL CIRCULATION LIST

Dear Colleague

**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS IN RESPONSE TO NEW VARIANT SARS-COV-2
IDENTIFIED**

You will be aware from media reports that a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 has emerged in recent days. This variant, B.1.1.529, was first identified in South Africa as well as Botswana and Hong Kong (both linked with travel to South Africa). It has subsequently been identified in other countries. The variant has a number of mutations in key locations of the genome which suggest it may be highly transmissible and may be able to evade immunity from current vaccines and prior infection. Local epidemiology in South Africa suggests fast growth in a population who had high levels of immunity.

The UK Government has announced a full travel ban on flights from six southern African countries South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Eswatini from 4pm on 26 November 2021 until 28 November 2021. These countries have also been added to the Northern Ireland red list and when the flight ban is lifted, returning travellers arriving in to all UK airports and ports from all these countries will be required to enter managed quarantine. The situation is evolving and updated information is available on [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance and support - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-and-support)

Anyone who has arrived in Northern Ireland or travelled through any of the countries listed above in the past 10 days should self-isolate immediately for 10 full days after arrival. All members of their households should also self-isolate.

Officials from UK Government and Northern Ireland are continuing to discuss the situation with their counterparts in Ireland. The Chief Medical Officers and their teams in both jurisdictions also continue to liaise as the situation evolves.

The variant B.1.1.529 has not been identified in the UK or Ireland to date. However, it is very possible that individuals infected with the new strain have travelled to many countries including the UK and Ireland. As a precautionary measure we are writing to advise that HSC Trusts, Primary Care and our Contact Tracing service should now implement the following actions:

HSC Trusts and Primary Care

- A full travel history must be obtained for all individuals presenting to health and social care services with immediate effect. Enquiry must be made about travel to or via Southern Africa or through any of the countries identified above.
- All individuals who have a travel history from any of the listed countries in the past 10 days and who present to health services including primary care must be tested for COVID-19, they should be tested through Pillar 1 testing arrangements - that is **through HSC Trust laboratory services and not through Pillar 2 arrangements**;
- Should such individuals present to primary care or out-of-hours services arrangements should be made through the local Trust for testing through Pillar 1 - see Annex A overleaf for contacts to arrange in each HSC Trust;
- Any individual with a travel history from any of the listed countries in the preceding 10 days who requires emergency assessment or admission to hospital should be managed in strict isolation, that is in a single room with en-suite bathroom facilities;
- Standard COVID-19 personal protective equipment (PPE) should be worn;
- These patients should not be cohorted with other COVID-19 patients;
- These patients should be tested on admission and regularly while in hospital. Current PCR assays in use should be used for testing and further advice on this will be provided as required;
- Should any patient with a relevant travel history test positive, the test should be **appropriately labelled, prioritised and sent urgently to the RVL laboratory for reflex testing and whole genome sequencing to arrive before 11am for testing that day. It is the responsibility of the clinician requesting the test to ensure the results are appropriately followed up.**
- If they test positive and are sufficiently ill to require inpatient treatment patients will be preferably managed in the regional infectious diseases unit in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast HSC Trust.

- Respiratory specimens for these patients must be prioritised by laboratory services and if positive must be subject to whole genome sequencing, these specimens should be appropriately labelled and flagged to ensure that they are prioritised through laboratory systems;
- Any individual with a travel history from any of the listed countries in the previous 10 days should have routine non-urgent outpatient, ambulatory or primary care, or planned elective care deferred until 14 days have passed since their return to Northern Ireland. Pre-procedure testing guidance issued by the regional Expert Advisory Group on Testing should be carefully adhered to.

The Public Health Agency Contact Tracing Service is currently contacting all individuals who have travelled into Northern Ireland from or through any of the above countries in the past 10 days. Passenger locator forms are being used to identify travellers and make contact. Those with a travel history are being asked to isolate along with their households. Travellers are being asked to take a PCR test at day 2 and day 8 or one PCR or a single PCR test if they have arrived more than five days ago. These samples will be prioritised for whole genome sequencing should they be positive.

PHA may not be able to contact all returned travellers for a number of reasons. It is important to be aware of this and take a full travel history from everyone presenting to health and social care services as requested above.

Should you become aware of a member of staff who has recently returned from any of these countries you should advise them to isolate immediately along with their families. Further assistance on arranging testing for individuals in this situation can be obtained from the Public Health Agency Duty Room telephone 0300 555 0119 Monday to Friday. Out of hours contact ambulance control on 028 9040 4045 and ask for the public health doctor on call.

I appreciate your support and cooperation with these actions. This is an evolving situation and we will keep you updated. To reiterate, these are precautionary measures and they will be kept under continuing review as more definitive information on the variant strain is obtained.

Yours sincerely



PROF SIR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer

Circulation List

Director of Public Health/Medical Director, Public Health Agency (*for onward distribution to all relevant health protection staff*)

Assistant Director Public Health (Health Protection), Public Health Agency
 Director of Nursing, Public Health Agency
 Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines Management, Health and Social Care Board *(for onward distribution to Community Pharmacies)*
 Directors of Pharmacy HSC Trusts
 Director of Social Care and Children, HSCB
 Family Practitioner Service Leads, Health and Social Care Board *(for cascade to GP Out of Hours services)*
 Medical Directors, HSC Trusts *(for onward distribution to all Consultants, Occupational Health Physicians and School Medical Leads)*
 Nursing Directors, HSC Trusts *(for onward distribution to all Community Nurses, and Midwives)*
 Directors of Children's Services, HSC Trusts
 RQIA *(for onward transmission to all independent providers including independent hospitals)*
 Medicines Management Pharmacists, HSC Board *(for cascade to prescribing advisers)*
 Regional Medicines Information Service, Belfast HSC Trust
 Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service, Northern HSC Trust
 Professor Donna Fitzsimons, Head of School of Nursing and Midwifery QUB
 Professor Sonja McIlpatrick, Head of School of Nursing, University of Ulster
 Heather Finlay, CEC
 Donna Gallagher, Open University
 Professor Paul McCarron, Head of School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, UU
 Professor Colin McCoy, Head of School, School of Pharmacy, QUB
 Professor Colin Adair, Postgraduate Pharmacy Dean, NI Centre for Pharmacy Learning and Development, QUB
 Joe Brogan, Assistant Director of Integrated Care, HSCB
 Michael Donaldson, Head of Dental Services, HSCB *(for distribution to all General Dental Practitioners)*
 Raymond Curran, Head of Ophthalmic Services, HSCB *(for distribution to Community Optometrists)*
 Trade Union Side
 Clinical Advisory Team
 Louise McMahon, Director of Integrated Care, HSCB

This letter is available on the Department of Health website at
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/professional-medical-and-environmental-health-advice/hssmd-letters-and-urgent-communications>

Annexe A

Trust Area Contact Details to Arrange Testing through Pillar 1

Belfast Trust Via Royal Hospital Switchboard and ask for Patient Flow Tel No – 07795842425

South-Eastern Trust Via Ulster Hospital Switchboard and ask for Clinical Service Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 9048 4511

Northern Trust Email HCW.Testing@northerntrust.hscni.net Via Antrim Area Hospital Switchboard and ask for Microbiologist On-Call Tel No – 028 9442 4000

Southern Trust Assistant Director Cancer and Clinical Services Tel No – 07920875602. Out of hours contact via Craigavon Hospital Switchboard on 028 38891733

Western Trust

Northern Sector – via Altnagelvin Hospital Switchboard and ask for Senior Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 7134 5171

Southern Sector – via South-West Area Hospital Switchboard and ask for Senior Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 66382000