



*Medical Council of New Zealand*

## **Advice on the standards expected of doctors during a pandemic**

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### **Background**

1. This statement has been written to inform doctors of the standards of practice that would be expected of them by the Medical Council of New Zealand during a pandemic.
2. Through-out history doctors have responded to medical emergencies with compassion and dedication. In the case of a pandemic, the Council expects that the majority of doctors will be available to provide care to the ill.

### **Ethical principles**

#### *Before providing care*

3. Doctors must ensure that they are appropriately informed and prepared for any potential outbreak situation. In light of the current threat of an influenza pandemic all doctors should be familiar with the alert system and information available from the Ministry of Health<sup>1</sup>.
4. Before you make yourself available to provide care to the ill, make sure that appropriate arrangements have been made for your own family.
5. If you are running a research programme involving patients or healthy volunteers you should consider whether to continue or interrupt your research. If you decide to continue, you should regularly review your decision. Your decision should be made on the basis of patient safety and best interests, taking into account the practical problems you or your patient group may face in providing and accessing care.

#### *While providing care<sup>2</sup>*

6. During a pandemic doctors are likely to be confronted by medical emergencies. In an emergency you have a duty of care<sup>3</sup> and must offer anyone at risk the treatment you could reasonably be expected to provide<sup>4</sup>.
7. Emergency care is so much a part of a doctor's professional ethic that, in the opinion of the Council, a registered doctor or a qualified doctor who is not registered may render medical or surgical aid outside his or her usual scope of practice to any person during an emergency<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Available from <http://www.moh.govt.nz/pandemicinfluenza>

<sup>2</sup> The following statements are taken from Council resources already in publication.

<sup>3</sup> *The doctor's duty to help in an emergency*

<sup>4</sup> *Good medical practice*

<sup>5</sup> The Council is developing a new scope of practice to facilitate this. During a pandemic or disaster doctors may be temporarily registered within this scope. Council will provide regular updates about what this will mean to you and the care you are able to provide.

8. Make the care of your patient your first concern<sup>6</sup>.
9. When treating a patient might put your health or safety at risk you may take reasonable steps to protect yourself before investigating the condition or providing treatment<sup>7</sup>.
10. Doctors who become ill should consult a colleague and either modify their practice to prevent spread of the disease or go home<sup>8</sup>.
11. In a pandemic it is likely that medical resources will become scarce. Doctors should refer to Council's *Statement on safe practice in an environment of resource limitation* which outlines the standards expected in such situations. You may also be asked to work longer hours than is desirable. In such cases consider the needs of patients and also the risks which may be introduced by fatigue.
12. During a pandemic staff working in health protection agencies will be part of the healthcare team and you should share information with them freely. In addition, you should provide the data necessary for public health monitoring or surveillance.

### Doctor's liability in a pandemic

13. Some doctors have expressed concern about their medico-legal responsibilities in the event of a pandemic. The Health and Disability Commissioner has written a letter to Council on this matter that doctors might find helpful. This has been posted on Council's website [www.mcnz.org.nz](http://www.mcnz.org.nz) under the heading "News".

### Other relevant resources

- Council's *Good medical practice*
- Council's *Statement on safe practice in an environment of resource limitation*
- Council's *The doctor's duty to help in an emergency*
- <http://www.moh.govt.nz/pandemicinfluenza>
- The National Ethics Advisory Committee's *Getting through together: Ethical values for a pandemic*.

**Medical Council of New Zealand**  
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<sup>6</sup> *Good medical practice*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* You should also refer to the Ministry of Health's *Interim guidelines for personal protection and using personal protective equipment during an influenza pandemic* available from [http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/wpg\\_index/About-influenza+-+pandemic+-+guidelines+for+ppe](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/wpg_index/About-influenza+-+pandemic+-+guidelines+for+ppe)

<sup>8</sup> *Good medical practice*