

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

HSS(MD)9/2021

FOR ACTION

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

GP Medical Advisers, Health and Social Care Board
All General Practitioners and GP Locums (for onward
distribution to practice staff)

OOHs Medical Managers (for onward distribution to staff)

PLEASE SEE ATTACHED FULL CIRCULATION LIST

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Our Ref: HSS(MD)9/2021

Date: 16 January 2021

Dear Colleagues

**NEW VARIANTS OF SARS-COV-2 VIRUS (BRAZILIAN VARIANTS); ACTION FOR
THE HEALTH SERVICE**

You will be aware from reports that variant strains of SARS-CoV-2 virus have been emerging both within the UK and in a number of other countries. This letter specifically refers to SARS-COV-2 variants originating from Brazil. The variant VUI 202101/01 was first detected in samples from Brazil. It is believed that the emergence of this variant may be responsible for an increase in case rates in the country.

A second variant (VOC202101/02) and designated as a Variant of Concern by the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) has also been detected in Japan among travellers from Brazil with mutations similar to the original variant and additional mutations. Work is ongoing to understand the effect of the variants on disease characteristics such as transmissibility.

There are now UK wide restrictions in place on those returning from a range of countries in South America and with links to Brazil who may arrive into UK airports and ports.

Anyone who has arrived back from or transited through Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Cape Verde, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Panama, Portugal, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela in to any part of the UK including Northern Ireland must self-isolate for 10 days along with their household. Those who have arrived from those countries listed above within the last 14 days are also advised to self-isolate for 10 days along with their household.

As a precautionary measure as with other variants we are writing to advise that HSC Trusts, Primary Care and the *Test Trace and Protect* Contact Tracing Service should now implement the following actions –

- A full travel history must be obtained for all individuals presenting to health and social care services with immediate effect;
- A thorough occupational history should also be obtained from all individuals with a travel history from the countries listed above. For example those working in occupational settings with a high risk of onward transmission or with vulnerable populations should be risk assessed for testing for COVID-19 even if asymptomatic.
- All individuals who have a travel history from the countries listed above in the past 14 days *and* who present to health services 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 Annexe A overleaf for contacts to arrange in each HSC Trust;
- Any individual with a travel history from countries listed above in the preceding 14 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;
- If they test positive and require hospitalisation such patients will be managed in the regional infectious diseases unit in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast HSC Trust;
- 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 every 5 days while in hospital
- Respiratory specimens for these patients must be prioritised by laboratory services and if positive must be subject to whole genome sequencing as an urgent priority, these specimens should be appropriately labelled and flagged to ensure that they are prioritised through laboratory systems;
- Any individual with a travel history from the countries listed above in the previous 14 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.

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 strains is obtained.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael McBride". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

DR 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 McIlfatrick, Head of School of Nursing, University of Ulster
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Joe Brogan, Assistant Director of Integrated Care, HSCB
Donncha O’Carolan, HSCB (*for distribution to all General Dental Practitioners*)
Raymond Curran, Head of Ophthalmic Services, HSCB (*for distribution to Community Optometrists*)
Trade Union Side

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	<p>7 days per week, Mon-Sun, 08:00-17:00 please email directly to the BHSCT Testing Facility at MOTtestingCentreTeam@belfasttrust.hscni.net for urgent testing.</p> <p>In the out of hours period or for any emergency referral for assessment or admission, contact the Patient Flow SPOC number: 07795 842425.</p>
South-Eastern Trust	Via Ulster Hospital Switchboard and ask for Clinical Service Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 9048 4511
Northern Trust	<p>Email HCW.Testing@northerntrust.hscni.net</p> <p>Via Antrim Area Hospital Switchboard and ask for Microbiologist On-Call Tel No – 028 9442 4000</p>
Southern Trust	Assistant Director Cancer and Clinical Services Tel No – 07920 875602
Western Trust	<p>Northern Sector – via Altnagelvin Hospital Switchboard and ask for Senior Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 7134 5171</p> <p>Southern Sector – via South-West Area Hospital Switchboard and ask for Senior Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 6638 2000</p>