

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



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

[www.health-ni.gov.uk](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk)

**HSS(MD) 92/2020**

**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) 92/2020

Date: 24 December 2020

Dear Colleague

**NEW VARIANT OF SARS-COV-2 VIRUS IN SOUTH AFRICA; ACTIONS FOR  
HEALTH SERVICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

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 variant VUI 202012/02 which is of South African origin.

This particular variant of the virus is thought to be the behind the recent surge in cases in South Africa, which has manifested as a particularly marked second wave of the pandemic in that country. While our understanding of the characteristics of this variant of the virus are still evolving, it is currently thought that this variant may be more transmissible than previous strains.

There are now UK wide restrictions in place on those returning from South Africa who may arrive into UK airports and ports. **Anyone who has arrived back from, or transited through South Africa into any part of the UK including Northern Ireland must self-isolate for 10 days along with their household. Those who have arrived from South Africa within the last 14 days are also advised to self- isolate for 10 days along with their household.**

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.

As a precautionary measure 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;

- All individuals who have a travel history from South Africa 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 South Africa 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 South Africa 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 from South Africa 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 strain is obtained.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely



**DR MICHAEL McBRIDE**  
Chief Medical Officer



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 – 07795 842425
South-Eastern Trust	Via Ulster Hospital Switchboard and ask for Clinical Service Manager On-Call, Tel No – 028 9048 4511
Northern Trust	Email <a href="mailto:HCW.Testing@northerntrust.hscni.net">HCW.Testing@northerntrust.hscni.net</a> 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 – 07920 875602
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 6638 2000