

Sentinel General Practice Respiratory Virus Surveillance

GENERAL PRACTICE MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

Background

The New Zealand respiratory virus surveillance system provides important information on respiratory viruses circulating in the community, the population groups most affected, and the effectiveness of vaccines and other preventative measures. This allows for better planning and support, including for vulnerable communities who are inequitably affected by respiratory infections. Sentinel GP surveillance is an essential component of respiratory virus surveillance, supporting earlier identification of respiratory infection outbreaks before patients begin presenting for tertiary care.

The COVID-19 pandemic response impacted heavily on existing surveillance systems, but also led to the development of some new tools. We are now building the surveillance systems back up to ensure that we have a robust system for monitoring COVID-19, as well as influenza and other respiratory viruses.

The team at ESR have spent some time consulting with GPs, reviewing and improving the sentinel GP surveillance system to incorporate feedback and learnings from the pandemic. We are continuing surveillance **all year-round** to ensure that we can monitor all outbreaks and peaks, even if they occur in the summer season. We have adjusted the protocol to simplify the system and enable general practices to have flexibility to suit their local resourcing.

If you wish to read more about sentinel surveillance you can read the WHO guidance on integrating COVID-19 and influenza surveillance¹, and ESR's description of the systems we operate in New Zealand². You can view ESR's dashboard which summarises the current circulating respiratory viruses here: <https://www.esr.cri.nz/digital-library/respiratory-illness-dashboard/>

Why participate?

We need at least 100 practices from across the country to participate in sentinel GP surveillance for the calculation of robust population level projections and assumptions. In 2022, we only had 53 practices participating in this programme, in 2023 this increased to 88 practices. We still need more practices to join us to improve the quality and representativeness of respiratory virus surveillance.

We share regular updates with sentinel practices about the results for their local community so they know what viruses are circulating amongst their patients and offer a participation certificate which you can display to show you are a part of the community effort to improve public health. We review swab numbers and invite eligible practices to invoice us at the end of each season, which is usually around October and April.



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Funding and incentives

RNZCGP Maintenance of Professional Standards (MOPS) points can be claimed by GPs who participate in respiratory virus surveillance.

As a token of appreciation for your time and effort, a payment (\$500) will be made at the end of both the winter and summer surveillance seasons to each sentinel practice that submits swabs for those periods. These payments will be made in approximately September and March. Additionally, high volume practices that submit more than 30 swabs during winter (1 May – 30 September) will qualify for an extra \$500 payment)

What we need from your practice

Your practice will swab 3-6 patients who meet the influenza-like-illness (ILI) case definition each week, fill out an electronic form and send the swabs to ESR's National Influenza Centre for testing. Swabs will be tested for influenza, SARS-CoV-2, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and several other respiratory viruses. Results come through in two stages – first the influenza and COVID-19 results within two working days of receipt at the laboratory, and the full panel finalises the swab result within 7-10 working days.

We are asking sentinel sites to continue **year-round sampling** to help us monitor respiratory virus patterns more closely, especially since SARS-CoV-2 is not currently circulating in a seasonal pattern. ESR will provide all supplies needed so there will be no cost other than the time it takes for your staff to swab a patient, fill out the electronic form and package the swab.

Next steps

If you're interested in signing up as a sentinel practice for our respiratory surveillance programme, please get in touch with your public health unit representative, or ESR directly at Influenza.Surveillance@esr.cri.nz.

Your team will then undergo an onboarding process and be sent a package with essential documentation and supplies. Following onboarding, your team can then begin swabbing patients immediately using the best systematic sampling strategy for your community. View the protocol for more detail on our website: <https://www.esr.cri.nz/expertise/public-health/infectious-disease-intelligence-surveillance/respiratory-surveillance-sentinel-practice-information/>

