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Message to Secondary Schools In Whanganui Health District Regarding Measles

There have been more than 50 measles cases in New Zealand over the past two months, including ten confirmed cases in Levin. Most cases have been teenagers, and there has been disruption in a number of schools because of the need to exclude unimmunised students. The reason for exclusion is that a person who gets measles can be infectious for 1-2 days before there is any sign of illness, and several days before the rash. This means they can spread the infection before they are identified and isolated. In Levin at least two excluded students developed measles while in isolation, which shows the value of taking such a measure.

If a secondary school student gets measles, Public Health will rely on parents providing information about their child's immunisation history. After assessing level of contact within the school we will very likely advise the following action, depending on whether the student has been vaccinated with MMR (measles/mumps/rubella) vaccine:

- Students with no previous MMR vaccination, or with only one previous MMR vaccination: exclude from school for 14 days from last contact with the case
- Students with two previous MMR vaccinations: no exclusion.

The same exclusion rules will also apply to any staff born after 1 January 1969. Those born before this date have nearly all had measles and are protected.

The best preparation for such an event is to make sure as many students as possible have had two doses of MMR vaccine. It is much better to do this ahead of time, rather than in the middle of an outbreak. Experience at other secondary schools indicates that about 10-15% of students need a second dose of MMR, and a further 10-15% need both doses for full immunity.

Many students will have a record at home of their immunisations. If you are unsure about vaccination record this information is usually available via the general practice. Catch-up doses of MMR are available free from your general practice.

Patrick O'Connor
Medical Officer of Health