

Media Brief

TO Media outlets

FROM Dr Josephine Herman, Secretary

DATE 09 March 2020

SUBJECT Cruise ship *Maasdam* arriving in Rarotonga Wednesday 11/03/2020

The cruise ship *Maasdam* will be arriving in Rarotonga on Wednesday.

Te Marae Ora Cook Islands Ministry of Health (TMO) has undertaken a thorough risk assessment of the ship for COVID-19 and wants to reassure the public that there is low risk to public health.

“We have assessed where the cruise ship *Maasdam* has come from and also where the passengers and crew have travelled to in the last 14 days. There have been no stops at a high risk country and the onboard doctors have confirmed that there is no person onboard with COVID-19 symptoms. This means we can classify it as low risk,” Secretary of Health Dr Josephine Herman said.

“We know cruise ships are of particular concern to people, and cruise ships have been particularly visible in the global response to COVID-19. The reality is that we actually have more time to assess COVID-19 risk on a ship than with flights. This is because we can liaise with onboard doctors and undertake due diligence with a robust risk assessment. We have more time to analyse a cruise ship before it arrives,” said Dr Herman.

Recently, cruise ships have introduced questionnaires specifically designed to screen passengers for COVID-19.

“We take the public health risk to our communities seriously and we are engaging with our Community Health Advisory Committee and Puna representatives on Rarotonga for their input. Our responsibility to public health and our people must come first. That said, we are also talking to tourism and the private sector about the impact on businesses. We know that a lot of people’s livelihoods here depend on visitors to the Cook Islands,” said Dr Herman.

The Cook Islands Government acknowledges that at some point a case of COVID-19 in the Cook Islands is likely. This could come from a Cook Islander returning from a trip overseas, or a visitor. Border control checks do not guarantee an absolute protection to the Cook Islands, because the incubation period is up to 14 days. This means people may not show any symptoms when they arrive in country.

“We have travel advisories in place, but our borders will most likely need to stay open to some extent. For example, we rely on New Zealand to support us with medical evacuations. We also need supplies to come in and allow our people to travel out. These are the decisions we are constantly working through and discussing with our stakeholders,” said Dr Herman.

Maasdam will be docking on Wednesday with approximately 1000 people on board.

“We have advised the ship’s doctors to ensure all passengers are practising the advice we have provided for our people, that is to regularly wash your hands, avoid touching your face, cover your coughs and sneezes, clean surfaces regularly and social distancing: avoid kisses, hugs and hand shaking and replace these with smiles, a wave or a nod.”

Cruise ships have stopped travelling to the Pa Enea until at least April. Although there was no specific risk of COVID-19 this decision was made by the National Health Emergency Taskforce acknowledging the community’s concerns, as well as fragile health systems, infrastructure and vulnerable and remote populations in the Pa Enea.

The public health risk of *Maasdam* for Rarotonga remains low.

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