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PQ 10935/21: To ask the Minister for Health if the three cases of the Brazil P1 variant identified in Ireland are directly associated with recent travel from Brazil; the steps he is taking to prevent further importation of this variant and others through travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ ref 10933/21: To ask the Minister for Health the details of his response to the arrival of the Brazil P1 variant of Covid-19 into Ireland which was announced on 19 February 2021; the steps he is taking to minimise the spread of this variant; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Shortall,

Thank you for your representations.

To date, the Brazilian Variant of Concern (VOC) (P.1) has been confirmed in seven cases of COVID-19, three of which were confirmed in week 9 of the year (week commencing March 8th). Five of the seven cases are travel related and one is a close contact of a confirmed case. One has no travel link identified yet. Additionally, there are also two probable P1 cases – new cases of the Brazilian variant – identified in the last week. Both of the probable cases are associated with travel and whole genome sequencing has been requested on their samples. Enhanced investigation is undertaken in all cases.

In order to minimise the onward spread of variants of concern the HSE has implemented various measures. A HSE Variant of Concern Oversight Group, which reports weekly to NPHE, and a Public Health Operational Group meet weekly to provide strategic guidance and operational support. Further to this, a Whole Genome Sequencing Programme has been established and its Steering Group meets weekly. Enhanced epidemiological investigations and contact tracing are undertaken on all cases, and outbreak control teams are convened as necessary and appropriate, to ensure necessary actions are undertaken in a timely coordinated manner. As per reports to NPHE, in the absence of mandatory quarantine, stopping the onward spread of VOC within Ireland is difficult to assure. The Department of Health have established a Travel Expert Advisory Group to advise NPHE on countries of concern and to add or remove countries to the Government's list of 'high-risk' countries. Government provide travel advice guidance: gov.ie - COVID-19 Travel Advice (www.gov.ie) which includes gov.ie - Mandatory Hotel Quarantine (www.gov.ie) coming into effect this week (week of March 22nd). The HSE HPSC Variants of Concern (VOC): Interim guidance for Clinicians, Hospitals and Public Health is available on hpsc.ie (see [Variants Guidance.pdf \(hpsc.ie\)](#)).

Below is a summary of process/steps taken from Public Health and Contact tracing perspective.

Cases who have travelled from or through a country of concern within the 14 days prior to onset of COVID-19 or cases who, within the 14 days prior to the onset of COVID-19, have had exposure to someone whom they know has travelled from or through one of these countries in the last month, are referred to the Specialised Queue for enhanced contact tracing. Where cases have travelled from or through a country of concern (or who, within the 14 days prior to the onset of COVID-19, have had exposure to someone whom they know has travelled from or through one of these countries in the last month), a detailed travel history is obtained, enhanced restrictions are advised, and samples are sent for variant of concern analysis. Their close contact details are collected, referred for testing and they are recommended enhanced restrictions measures.

If the case travelled during their infectious period, an Exposure Investigation is set up for the inbound flight, indicating that this applies to a flight with a case who travelled from or through a country of concern. The original connecting flight is referred to the HPSC for international awareness, indicating that the case has travelled from or through a country of concern. Contact tracing of the inbound flight is undertaken nationally, restriction measures for close contacts advised and referrals for testing made.

All close contacts are advised that their household members must restrict their movements for the same period as them. Household members do not need to be tested unless they develop symptoms. If they do develop symptoms, they must contact a GP for a test referral. They must advise the GP that they are living in the same household as a close contact of a case that has travelled from or through a country of concern. All close contacts are advised that after their self-isolation period they must strictly follow the 2-metre social distancing guidelines and wear mask for a week. If they develop symptoms, they must self-isolate immediately and contact a GP to get tested, advising the GP that they have been in contact with a case who has travelled from or through a country of concern.

Attempts to contact the cases and close contacts are made by phone. If no phone number is available attempts are made to get this through email and the electronic passenger locator form. The close contact is referred for testing, where possible. If necessary letters are written, and, where required public health have asked these to be hand delivered by the Gardaí to re-enforce the requirement for co-operation.

Subsequently, where VOC are not-detected a follow-up call is made to cases and close contacts who have travelled from or through a country of concern to advise them of the result and to follow normal public health advice.

Where a VOC is detected the management of these cases and contacts is determined by the Medical Officer of Health of the relevant Department of Public Health. Further source investigations and enhanced contact tracing may be required to identify and contain chains of transmission.

Yours sincerely,



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