



Statement from the Privacy Foundation New Zealand

6 July 2020

Concern at reports of privacy breach of Covid-19 cases

Privacy Foundation New Zealand was concerned to see the reports of a privacy breach in which members of the media were given access to a document that included the full names, addresses, and age of the 18 people described as “active cases” of COVID-19 as well as the names of the hotel and one hospital in which they were located.

Health information is generally considered to be sensitive information. This is even more so during a global pandemic with high media interest in Covid-19 cases. Those in quarantine must have privacy to allow themselves to recover from this illness in peace without worrying about being contacted by the media or being discussed in public. This is particularly so given the intense public scrutiny of the isolation locations and public debate about people who carry or potentially carry the disease.

The privacy breach highlights the importance of having good security systems and training in place. Further, from 1 December 2020 and under the new Privacy Act 2020, all agencies must have the ability to identify notifiable privacy breaches and processes to comply with mandatory reporting. In our view, disclosure of this sort of information is likely to cause serious harm to the individuals concerned because of the sensitivity of the information. They are likely to be experiencing significant anxiety and significant loss of dignity with the threat of online publishing of their personal information.

The privacy breach also highlights why we have privacy legislation and other legal protections around personal information. Government is entrusted with large amounts of information about its citizens. Personal information must be looked after. It is taonga.

We hope not only that the Government properly investigates how the breach occurred but that it learns lessons from it for future management of Covid-related information. Where contact tracing, especially, is concerned, public trust is essential.

Note for editors

Contact for media enquiries: Gehan Gunasekara phone 021 0743419 (mob.); or email:

g.gunasekara@auckland.ac.nz