

Cancer treatment remains on track through the COVID pandemic.

For those already diagnosed with cancer, treatment largely continued through the COVID-19 lockdown, according to analysis carried out by the Cancer Control Agency.

Cancer Control Agency Chief Executive Prof Diana Sarfati says, "Medical oncology, radiation oncology and cancer surgery were well maintained over the period of the lockdown. This is a testament to the determination and innovation of all those in the cancer sector who have worked hard to make sure treatment continued for their patients."

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant disruption to diagnostic services.

"We looked at the impact of the lockdown on key procedures for the diagnosis of cancer, and found a significant decrease. There are likely to have been disruptions along the whole cancer diagnostic pathway from access to primary care and radiology," she comments.

This disruption to diagnostic services contributed to a reduction in new cancer diagnoses. For 2020 (to end April) there were 500 fewer cancer registrations compared to the same time period in 2019. This is a 6% decrease in registrations for both Māori and Pacific, and a 7% decrease for European over the whole year, with most of that decrease occurring during April.

"New Zealand has done incredibly well compared to what we have seen internationally in preventing our health system from becoming overrun. This protected people with cancer, enabling hospital services to continue and safeguarding those who are immunocompromised from the spread of COVID-19.

"A catch up on diagnostic services has now began and we will continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on the cancer pathway. This will feed into the sector's planning and ongoing delivery of care," says Sarfati.

The report indicates disruptions have not increased inequities, with Māori being less severely impacted across most measures.

Hei Āhuru Mōwai, Māori Cancer Leadership Aotearoa, Chairperson Dr Nina Scott notes, "The Agency-led, collaborative approach - with Māori at the table - has meant robust advice prioritising equitable outcomes was delivered."

Equity is an absolute priority for the Agency and ongoing monitoring will enable actions to be put in place during the COVID-19 recovery phase to maximise equity gains.