



New Zealand records biggest increase in registered deaths in 100 years

Description

NEW ZELAND: New Zealand has recorded the largest increase in the number of registered deaths since the 1918 influenza pandemic, new data from Stats NZ shows.

The births and deaths figures, for the year ending December 2022, show there were 38,574 deaths in 2022, 10.4 per cent (3642) more than in 2021.

This increase – attributed to Covid-19 and an ageing population – is the biggest year-on-year jump since the 55.4 per cent (5835) spike in deaths following the 1918 flu pandemic.

Most of the increase in deaths occurred in older age groups where Covid-19 poses an increased mortality risk.

However, an expert says this increase would have been higher and sooner in the pandemic had it not been for New Zealand's initial pandemic response.

University of Otago epidemiologist Michael Baker said, unlike other OECD countries, New Zealand had not recorded any excess mortality (deaths above and beyond the "normal" rate) over the initial years of the pandemic.

However, as the virus spread more widely in New Zealand in 2022 with the arrival of Omicron, Covid-19 deaths increased, with just under 2400 fatalities attributed to the virus last year.

"The two benefits of the elimination strategy were very few New Zealanders got infected in the first two years of the pandemic and that meant excess mortality went way negative.

"The measures were so effective at stopping circulating viruses we avoided the excess winter deaths from flu and other respiratory infections."

Another benefit of New Zealand's "elimination" strategy was that it allowed officials and community groups time to increase the country's vaccine coverage.

“It meant when the virus did circulate last year, very widely, it caused far fewer deaths than it would have if it had circulated early.

“We have spared our population the really high mortality seen in most countries that had widespread circulation.

“Of course, we are seeing excess mortality last year, the virus infected the majority of New Zealanders and it did result in death in one in a thousand people, based on reported numbers. That’s given us our excess mortality.”



Otago University epidemiologist Professor Michael Baker. Photo / Supplied

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In a normal year, there are relatively small fluctuations in the number of deaths per 1000 people in any given age group.

Four out of every five deaths in 2022 were of people aged 65 and older and 53 per cent were of those aged 80 years and older.

Stats NZ said deaths were gradually increasing over time, despite a generally increasing life expectancy.

“This is because of population growth, and more people in older ages where most deaths occur.

“The number of people in the population reaching these older ages is increasing, which will therefore increase the number of deaths occurring.”

Based on 2020-2022 death rates, a newborn boy has a life expectancy of 80.5 years and a newborn girl 84 years.

In 2022, there were 58,887 live births, 228 more than the previous year. The infant mortality rate was 3.5 deaths per 1,000 live births.

by Julia Gabel and Chris Knox

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