

## **Covid-19 journey: A scientist's warning from inside out amid 'mild' labelling of Omicron**

*Terry Taylor*



Terry Taylor, NZIMLS President

I was shocked at the ferocity of my symptoms when I tested positive for Covid-19. We are constantly told Omicron is a mild illness; nothing to worry about, most people get mild symptoms and certainly nothing to get concerned about. For context, I am a fit and healthy 55-year-old man (1.80m tall and 90kg) who exercises most days. I work full time as a medical laboratory scientist in a hospital setting. I am double vaxed, boosted and closely follow public health measures to the nth degree.

I was woken on a Thursday night by an intense sneezing fit that was like nothing I had ever had before. To be safe and sure I thought I had better take a rapid antigen test (RAT) before heading into work at the laboratory on the Friday. The positive test strip appeared within 30 second and confirmed that I was now another positive Covid-19 case. I was shocked, as apart from the sneezing fit, I felt completely fine. I had been for two long runs and trained at the gym during the previous few days and most certainly didn't have an inkling about having Covid-19. This is clearly one very stealthy virus that knows how to spread, prosper, and survive.

The first 24 hours I experienced a variety of minor symptoms: a headache coming and going, more sneezing and the start of a dry hacking cough. I did still have my taste and smell and no drop in appetite. I was thinking 'this isn't all bad, I don't feel too bad, and I have a week at home to catch up on all my overdue tasks'. I had a full day of remote meetings and phone calls on the Friday to keep me busy and was wondering how I was going to fill in my sudden increase in spare time. Just when things looked rosy, the fever hit overnight, I woke to a soaking T-shirt and sheets and a blinding headache that wasn't quite like anything I had had before. I normally don't take any medication for anything but took some anti-inflammatory and antihistamines, both recommended by trusted health professionals.

The next part is harder to explain, random joint and bone pain that came and went. My headache dropped down a level and I tried to write and answer a few e-mails. I found I couldn't concentrate at all, and I was forgetting names, places, and terminology for no good reason.



**Figure 1.** The RAT which alerted Terry Taylor that he had contracted Covid-19.

Even though it was a warm, calm day I started to shiver and feel very cold, I put more clothes on, but this didn't help so I lit the fire. My neighbours must have wondered whether I had truly gone mad! And the damn headache was back, along with the random bone pain. My dry cough was now constant, and every cough made my head throb more. Luckily, I still had my sense of taste and an appetite, so it was time for dinner and an early night. Unfortunately, it was another night of drenching sweats, but I woke feeling better than the day before. I took more medication and wondered whether I was ever going to improve. The lingering dry cough was very annoying and interrupted just about anything I tried to do, my nose was dry, but I had an ache in the sinus region.

I noticed I was strangely fatigued while just moving around. Standing up felt like I had just done a 200kg squat and simply stepping outside saw me huffing and puffing like I had run up a steep hill. My brain was still not functioning right but at least I could remember my colleagues' names again. The random body pains were becoming more debilitating as the day went on.

By Sunday night I was feeling strangely cold again despite the warm day and evening. And that damn headache wouldn't go away. The muscles in my legs felt tired and I was starting to get random cramps despite eating and drinking normally and not exercising. I take magnesium and zinc supplements after long

runs so took some prophylactic tablets before bed. I felt warm in bed but every time I rolled over, I got that awful leg cramp feeling and ended up drifting off to sleep on my back. I was only up to day four and already it seemed a lingering infection that would be difficult to shake.

Every time I medicated to control my symptoms; I got a short period of relief before another set of different symptoms kicked in. By day six, I was well and truly over it. I felt weak, shaken and had a dry hacking cough like a pack-a-day smoker. I did my obligatory RAT, but alas it was still positive, though it took five minutes to become positive this time not 30 seconds, so I believed I must be healing. Finally, on day eight, the test line on the RAT was barely detectable and the remnants of my hacking cough were all but gone.

Omicron for me was not some mild cold or flu. I seldom get ill with anything and can't remember when I last had more than two days with any illness. My body feels shaken up and I know it will take a while to get through and over this. It felt like my immune response was chasing the virus around my body as it played a real time cat-and-mouse game of mimicry and antibody evasion. It still feels like a mild concussion, without the impact injury.

As a scientist, I think a lot about symptoms translating to medical findings: it seems realistic to hypothesise that Omicron may stimulate reactions that can cause long-term immune activation against our neurologic systems, so I urge other medical professionals to be mindful of this. Having this virus render my usually fit and active body a pile of misery has been disconcerting and the ease with which it promoted immune chaos is scientifically worrying. We clearly need to listen to and

support those scientists who are chasing the vital diagnostic markers that may hold the key to long term reactivation of lingering symptoms.

The big thing I worry about is that we're once again going to have an 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' approach when it comes to the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 infection on people's health. This has been an experience that I most certainly don't want others to go through and I urge everyone to use every health measure available to mitigate the risk to the most vulnerable members of our communities. I don't wish my experience on anyone.

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