

Beating big C is up to us all

You'll be relieved to know I've found a temporary remedy for my undisciplined handshaking – I'll be keeping my fingers crossed there are no Covid-19 cases linked with Womad.

The final decision to go ahead was presumably made by the Prime Minister, and it's difficult to understand, given she simultaneously stopped other equally prominent events...and Taranaki has one of the country's highest concentrations of those most vulnerable to the disease.

Maybe she felt her government has already done enough damage to the Taranaki economy.

If things do turn bad, what do you know about the new buzz phrase: "self isolation"?

I got curious after reading about the Highlanders rugby team following their wasted trip to Argentina. The story mentioned something about restricting face-to-face contact to one or two metres and 15 minutes.

That seemed to suggest the germs will behave themselves for a quarter of an hour and only then cross the space between people. Try explaining that to a two-year-old, a virile young sports-person or...well, anyone.

Suspecting such odd verbiage originated from official advice, I looked up the Ministry of Health website – and got a shock.

They have many different sections under "Covid-19", and a thorough read indicates the ministry is overwhelmed to the point its advice has become overly long, confused, wordy, fragmented and repetitive.

The website has articles posted from the beginning of February - when much less was known - and now they're mixed up with later pieces of advice, some of them contradicting earlier items.

For example, face masks were advocated in February, but this month they are recommended only for health professionals or those with the virus.

The safe distance is unclear. Our MoH recommends two metres, but when you follow its link to the World Health Organisation its advice is only one.

The recommendation about who should get in supplies for a household in self isolation is not clear, judging by comments from a woman interviewed on Seven Sharp after she and her family got off a plane.

She said they were going to stay with her mother, who would be doing the supermarket shopping for them, but the ministry seems to be saying that should be done by someone not living there, with the items left at the door.

That brings me to the subject of supermarkets, one of the few places we all need to visit: they don't get a mention on the website (when I last looked late this week).

Under the heading "information for specific audiences" the ministry has guidance for airlines, hotels, aged care providers, health professionals and border controllers, but not supermarket managers.

I toured New Plymouth's six supermarkets to see what they're doing, and the answer is not much that's obvious. All say they are stressing sanitary hand practices for staff, but that's about the only consistent approach I heard about.

Some are sanitising the handles of trolleys, but some are not. Some have their fruit and produce stackers wearing gloves, but most don't, including staff gathering items for home delivery. Nobody is wearing masks.

I asked the head offices of Countdown and New World to tell me what guidance they are getting from the ministry, but only the former responded.

Kiri Hannifin, Countdown's GM Health and Safety, says their supermarkets and supply chain have always had thorough cleaning, hygiene and food safety but now they've added more, including cleaning high-touch areas every couple of hours.

"We're following MoH guidelines around hand-washing and cleaning, and have reinforced this with all our teams."

She says the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention believe there is no evidence Covid-19 is transmitted via food.

However, the NZ ministry advises people to wash produce before eating it, and Countdown is providing hand sanitiser and wipes for customers to use.

Which brings me to the key point. Governments, official organisations, experts and companies can only do so much. It's really up to us.

That's a worry. A retailer friend says she remonstrated with a customer who was coughing without using his elbow (or anything else) and his reaction was: "They're making too much fuss about nothing."

I have two heroes in all this. One is the editor of the *Taranaki Daily News* for his recommendation we should all look after our neighbours.

The other is the South Asian fruit guy at Merrilands New World supermarket, who told me he'll be wearing gloves for the duration to help ensure his customers are safe.