

The Covid Response: A scientist's account of New Zealand's pandemic and what comes next.

Shaun Hendy. 2025. Bridget Williams Books. ISBN 9781991301321

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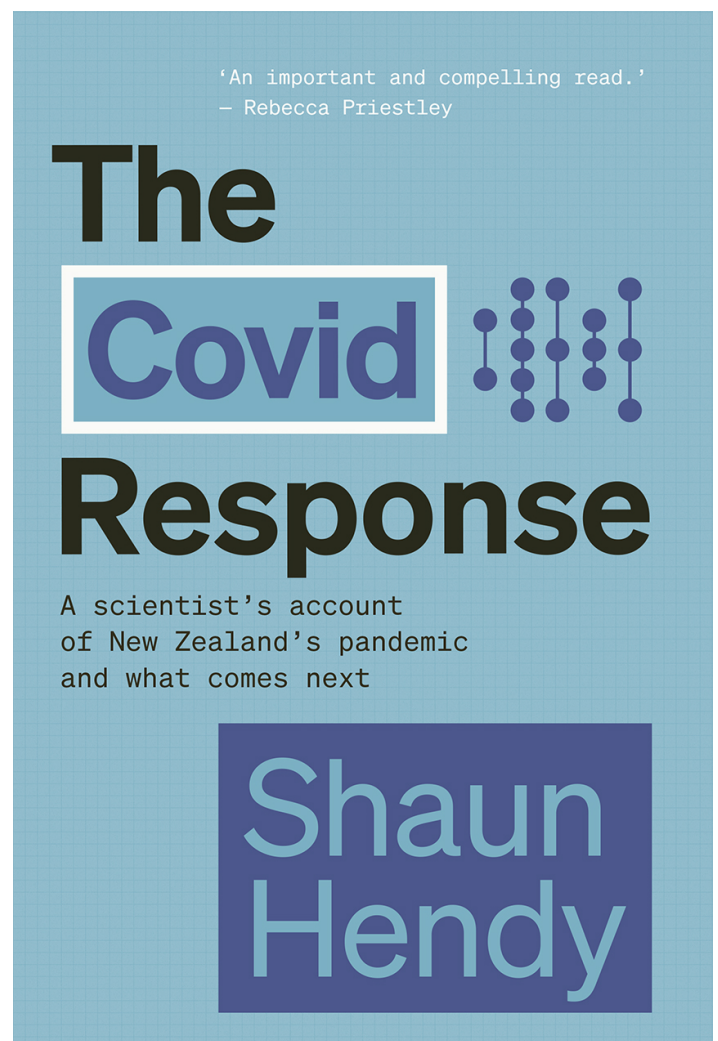
I write this review in the grip of an upper airways tract infection, while isolating myself from my family, and somewhat saddened that my usual infection control measures have failed me. I mask on public transport but rely on ventilation to protect me at work. I am regularly vaccinated. A coronavirus it may be, but I know it is not SARS-CoV-2 thanks to the last of our stash of rapid antigen tests.

I do the above because of a pandemic; anyone of my age has lived through a few, but only polio in living memory came close to anything like the worldwide impact of COVID-19 from 2020. It is a period in which we all participated in as the team of 5 million. And that makes for difficulties when it comes to writing about that period. Hendy chose the only possible approach available when history is so proximate and all encompassing. To write a memoir.

The Covid Response: A scientist's account of New Zealand's pandemic and what comes next is thus necessarily written in the first person and is populated with many of the people we came to know during the pandemic – the politicians, the officials and the other science communicators. Perhaps more interesting are the roles of the many people who stood behind those we know, but not without Hendy's generous recognition of their contributions. What quickly becomes apparent from the start of the COVID story is the role of volunteerism in our response; science stepped forward without being asked and without being funded. Hendy was one of those who deliberately stepped up. But it was not until 27 March 2020, four days after announcement of the first Lockdown, that Hendy's part in the pandemic response became official, and many months before that official involvement became funded.

Hendy is not a health scientist, but he has a transparent understanding of health. He is a physicist, a modeller, and arguably a social entrepreneur. As the first Director of Te Pūnaha Matatini, a transdisciplinary research centre that focuses on complexity, he had been involved in creating diverse groups to address big issues from multiple perspectives. Networks and how they operate in a small country are apparent throughout the book. Hendy's involvement started with personal interest over glass of wine, progressed to suggesting to a reporter they build

a simple model for the NZ Herald website, followed by conversations with Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, who directed him to contact the Ministry of Health Chief Science Advisor.



But being a memoir means the story is episodic. Hendy does not attempt to write a social history of the pandemic, although the first chapter includes elements of such an approach with its countdown from Day -56 to Day 0,

[†]Professor Andrew Jull does not know Shaun Hendy, purchased their own copy of the book and has no association with BWB, nor any competitor.

Lockdown. He writes about his involvement, telling us in the acknowledgements that he only wrote about the parts of the story that were his to tell. Even he had to sit watching the 1pm conferences to obtain information about that of which he was not a part. Consequently, do not expect completeness. Rather expect to be left hoping others will add to the narrative. Perhaps Hendy's book will start a run of such works as scientists, researchers, and policy-makers start to heal from the abuse they received from the dis- and misinformed.

Episodes need context, whether that be about the likely source of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (zoonotic, not laboratory breach), or difference between misinformation and disinformation, or the pertinent parts of the 1919 Royal Commission findings on New Zealand's response to the 1918 pandemic. Hendy's account is replete with such references, including more than 23 pages of citations, explanations, and expansions. My preference is for footnotes as flipping to the back of a book while reading is an irritant. That said, I enjoy a book with fulsome explanations, no matter how tangential. The inclusion of such material helps reveal authorial choices, thinking, and foci.

Serendipity often has a part in science. One of Te Pūnaha Matatini's intended workstreams when created had been infectious disease surveillance, although this work was deprioritised due to funding issues. But that initial interest provided a plan for modelling, and interviewing scientists for an earlier book (*Silencing Science*) had also provided Hendy with lessons from prior public crises. All the crises marked the necessity of working closely, and openly, with media.

Working closely with media, however, led to punishing schedules. Hendy describes a daily routine bookended by early morning media interviews and late evenings planning and responding to the next day's media requests, with media work throughout the day, followed, finally, by fitful sleep. No doubt a similarly brutal day was the script for all those fronting or commenting on the COVID-19 response.

Contrarian responses by folk such as the Plan B group, challenges by the Productivity Commission, or critique of modelling are not ignored in Hendy's book. He addresses their criticisms of New Zealand's elimination strategy at length, dispatching each of their arguments with piquant analysis. Our strategy, grounded in public health, with elimination as its initial aim was clearly the best one, both for health and economically.

"And what comes next" the book's title states. Another pandemic, of course. Are we prepared for it? Hendy does outline the suggested developments necessary for better pandemic preparedness, incorporating findings from New Zealand's Royal Commission and the Australian Commission of Inquiry. But I have heard one very prominent commentator, in response to questions about our preparedness, say simply "we're fucked". In the current environment I cannot but agree. However, Hendy states on his penultimate page the "vast majority of us made sacrifices to keep our people safe. If there is one thing I would hope for in the next pandemic, it is that we can recapture some

of the spirit that got us through those years...". That, too, is my hope.

I am a sucker for medical memoir. On my shelves are Neil Pearce's *Adverse Reaction: The Fenoterol Story* and Thomas J Moore's *Deadly Medicine: Why tens of thousands of heart patients died in America's worst drug disaster*. Shaun Hendy's *The Covid Response* joins them. It is compelling, engaging, and intense. And I will return to it as an accurate reminder of the pandemic in which we all played a part.