

Virtual Diabetes Register: Technical Guide

2022

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Contents

[Guide for use statement 4](#_Toc115438579)

[Possible reasons for false positives and false negatives 5](#_Toc115438580)

[Change of clinical practice over time 5](#_Toc115438581)

[Pharmaceuticals to treat diabetes and other conditions 6](#_Toc115438582)

[Some methods for identifying people with diabetes lack specificity 6](#_Toc115438583)

[References 6](#_Toc115438584)

[2021 revision 8](#_Toc115438585)

[2016 revision 9](#_Toc115438586)

[Routine annual revision of the VDR 11](#_Toc115438587)

[Privacy and confidentiality statement 11](#_Toc115438588)

[Appendices 12](#_Toc115438589)

[Appendix 1: Detailed information on VDR methodology (December 2021) 12](#_Toc115438590)

[Appendix 2: Known data quality issues with the VDR 14](#_Toc115438591)

[Appendix 3: Rule 8 of the Health Information Privacy Code 2020 and commentary 15](#_Toc115438592)

[Appendix 4: Definitions of VDR variables 17](#_Toc115438593)

# Guide for use statement

This document provides guidance about the appropriate use of the Virtual Diabetes Register (VDR) and highlights its limitations that users should be aware of.

Originally the VDR was designed to provide annual estimates of national diabetes prevalence and to inform policy and service planning. Since then, some of its outputs have also been used for statistical reporting and other research purposes.

After discussions with our legal advisors, the Ministry of Health has concluded that district health boards (DHBs) and primary health organisations (PHOs) are entitled to request an identifiable copy of the VDR for the purposes of regional planning and/or undertaking a clinical audit. Specifically:

a PHO is entitled to request information on patients enrolled at that PHO

* a DHB is entitled to request information on patients domiciled within that DHB **and** information on patients enrolled at PHOs it funds.

While the Ministry of Health will provide identifiable information to PHOs and DHBs in these circumstances, please note that the VDR was not designed to directly inform personal clinical intervention or action at an individual level. We do not recommend such practice. The VDR only identifies people within administrative data sets who have **suspected** diabetes based on the type of care they received in the past. The only diagnostic information used in creating the VDR is hospital clinical codes. For this reason, the VDR could potentially include people incorrectly identified as having diabetes when they do not.

The VDR collation process commences around the end of March each year and contains data from the previous calendar year up to 31 December. It identifies people with suspected diabetes from:

hospital discharges coded for diabetes mellitus (DM)

outpatient attendances for DM education management and DM retinal screening

subsidised community dispensings of pharmaceutical therapies that people with diabetes typically use

laboratory tests ordered where a patient has had four or more glycosylated haemoglobin (HbA1c) tests and two or more urinary albumin to creatinine ratio (ACR) tests.

Please see [Appendix 1](#_Appendix_1:_Detailed) for further detail about the methodology, including the clinical codes used to identify diabetes mellitus within hospital events.

VDR estimates at an aggregate level have a high correlation with the numbers in the corresponding practice registers (e.g., Thornley et al 2011). At individual level, however, they include some false positives (individuals on the VDR who do not have diabetes) and false negatives (individuals not on the VDR who in fact have diabetes).

## Possible reasons for false positives and false negatives

Reasons why the VDR may include false positives and false negatives include: clinical practice may change over time; pharmaceutical therapies for diabetes may be used to treat other conditions as well; and some methods of identifying people with diabetes may not exclude other conditions. Each of these reasons is illustrated here with an example. There are also variable degrees of data capture across DHBs as noted in [Appendix 2](#_Appendix_2:_Known).

## Change of clinical practice over time

### Example: HbA1c testing

The actual results of HbA1c tests are not available to confirm the diagnosis of diabetes, and the VDR algorithm relies on the fact that a given number of HbA1c tests were completed. However, HbA1c tests could be carried out for other purposes, such as screening for diabetes, or monitoring people with pre-diabetes or gestational diabetes.

The potential for incorrect identification has increased recently as the use of HbA1c in screening has become more common over time. This greater use may in part be a result of the formal endorsement of HbA1c as one of the diagnostic tests for the diagnosis of diabetes. Another reason why screening for diabetes has increased over time is that it is part of the cardiovascular (CVD) risk assessment, which itself has become more common as one of the national health targets.

The VDR attempts to address this potential source of error by using a strict selection criterion within the laboratory test part of the code. Specifically, to be on the VDR a person must have four or more HbA1c tests as well as two or more ACR tests within a two-year period.

## Pharmaceuticals to treat diabetes and other conditions

### Example: Metformin

The VDR collects data on the dispensing of metformin as a pharmaceutical used to treat diabetes but it may also be used to treat a range of conditions other than diabetes, including pre-diabetes, polycystic ovarian syndrome and gestational diabetes. The VDR attempts to partially address this issue by excluding women aged 12–45 years who are **solely** identified as a result of metformin use – that is, no other methods identify them as having diabetes.

## Some methods for identifying people with diabetes lack specificity

### Example: Outpatient data

The VDR uses outpatient data to identify people with suspected diabetes based on the type of outpatient clinic a person attended, rather than the diagnosis made in the clinic.

In the past, when the VDR was used solely at an aggregated or de-identified level, the impact of data quality issues has been small because the false positives and false negatives cancel each other out to a certain extent. However, using the VDR at an individual level increases the risk that the false positives (around 18 percent) and negatives (2 percent) will have a more harmful impact. For example, a health service might contact a patient without diabetes as part of diabetes clinical intervention or action.

A study of data for the Auckland Metro area from 31 December 2014 indicates that the revised VDR algorithm has a specificity of around 97 percent, sensitivity of around 87 percent, positive predictive value of 82 percent and negative predictive value of 98 percent (Chan et al 2018).

## References

Chan WC, Papaconstantinou D, Lee M, et al. 2018. Can administrative health utilisation data provide an accurate diabetes prevalence estimate for a geographical region? *Diabetes Research and Clinical Practice* 139: 59–71.

Thornley S, Wright C, Marshall R, et al. 2011. Can the prevalence of diagnosed diabetes be estimated from linked national health records? The validity of a method applied in New Zealand. *Journal of Primary Health Care* 3(4): 262–8.

# 2021 revision

In 2021, a more inclusive version of the VDR algorithm was established in addition to the traditional version. This enables the VDR to support a wider range of analyses.

**Output 1 (traditional method)** bases the diabetes prevalence estimates solely on the number of people alive and enrolled in a PHO **at 31 December of the VDR year**. This output method is useful for the purposes of health service planning, for example. The latest version of the VDR is v688.

Output 2 (more inclusive version) bases the diabetes prevalence estimates on people who were alive and enrolled in a PHO **at some point during the calendar year** (see [Table 1](#Table1)). This version can be used to:

better capture the population of people living with diabetes over the year of interest. This would be a useful output method when considering the cost and/or burden of disease over a year, for example.

include people that have died during the year. This allows more representative reporting of some outcomes, such as amputation rates for people with diabetes, and potentially other diabetes-related complications.

The updated VDR algorithm allows for the use of either of these methods of calculating diabetes prevalence. The tables presented on the Te Whatu Ora website contain data using output 1 of the VDR. If the user prefers to include people who were alive, those that have died, and PHO enrolled at any point during the year (output 2), this data is available to download also. For additional variables, you can make data requests to [data-enquiries@health.got.nz](mailto:data-enquiries@health.got.nz). See [Appendix 4](#_Appendix_4:_Definitions) for a full list of VDR variables.

Table 1: Summary of new variables introduced with output 2 of the VDR algorithm

| New variable | Summary of change |
| --- | --- |
| PHO\_Enrolled\_in\_year | Indicates if an individual has been enrolled in a PHO at any point during the calendar year. |
| Month\_yr\_of\_death | If an individual was alive at any point during the calendar year, the value in this column will equal month and year of death. |

The changes detailed above will be applied to the VDR and, in order to keep a consistent time series, historical versions of the VDR have been re-extracted using the updated algorithm.

For further information or if you want updated VDR data please contact [data-enquiries@health.got.nz](mailto:data-enquiries@health.got.nz).

# 2016 revision

In 2016, the Ministry of Health worked with a range of experts to update the VDR algorithm and improve its accuracy in estimating diabetes prevalence. The changes came into effect in March 2017.

Specifically, we compared assigned diabetes status of individuals based on the 2014 version of the VDR with the diabetes status based on the laboratory results stored in the Auckland regional laboratory result repository (TestSafe). We then refined the existing VDR algorithm by reviewing the sensitivity and positive predictive value of the VDR algorithm rules both individually and in combination. [Table 2](#Table2) summarises the changes based on this work.

Table 2: Changes to the VDR algorithm from March 2017

| Change | Summary of change | Example of change |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Reduced the time period of outpatient data (NNPAC) queried. | Three years of outpatient data is now queried to look for any evidence of diabetes (retinal screening or DM outpatient events). Previously all outpatient data (from July 2002 onwards) was considered for inclusion. | Old algorithm: Include if relevant outpatient event occurred between July 2002 and 2016.  2017 algorithm: Include if relevant outpatient event occurred between 2014 and 2016. |
| Reduced the time period of inpatient data (NMDS) queried. | Ten years of inpatient data is now queried to look for any evidence of diabetes (coded diagnoses). Previously all inpatient data (from 1999 onwards) was considered for inclusion. | Old algorithm: Include if relevant publicly funded discharge occurred between 1999 and 2016.  2017 algorithm: Include if relevant inpatient event occurred between 2007 and 2016. |
| Removed unnecessary data conditions from the pharmaceutical and outpatient parts of the algorithm. | Pharmaceuticals: Dispensings of glucagon are no longer considered as evidence of diabetes as people with diabetes-dispensed glucagon will also be dispensed other diabetes-related pharmaceuticals.  Outpatient: The diabetes specialist/ endocrinology clinics attendance rule was removed because it was also redundant. That is, to be included under this condition, a person would also need to meet another data condition. | Old algorithm: Include if person received two or more dispensings of glucagon hydrochloride (1570); include if person attended specialist/endocrinology clinic (purchase unit codes of M20004 and M20005) and also meets one of the other criteria.  2017 algorithm: These data conditions are no longer used. |
| Refined the algorithm so that it does not unintentionally include women receiving screening tests or treatment related to gestational diabetes. More specifically pharmaceuticals and lab tests around birth are not considered for inclusion. | Insulin may be used to treat gestational diabetes and a high number of lab tests are ordered for people with this condition. For this reason, insulin dispensed within five months before and three weeks after a birth event are not used in compiling the VDR. Likewise, lab tests with a visit date between nine months before and the day of the birth are not considered for inclusion. | New: This is a newly introduced data condition.  Note: Metformin is also known to treat gestational diabetes, among other conditions. The previous version of the VDR algorithm already accounts for this by not considering for inclusion women aged 12–45 who are dispensed metformin. |
| Added more requirements for identification within the laboratory claim data to limit false positives related to diabetes screening. | To be included on the VDR, a person must have four or more HbA1c tests and two or more ACR tests within a two-year period. Previously a person needed four HbA1c tests and one ACR test. | Old algorithm: Include if a person had four or more HbA1c (lab test code BG2) and one ACR (lab test code BP8) tests between 2015 and 2016.  2017 algorithm: Include if a person had four or more HbA1c (lab test code BG2) and two ACR (lab test code BP8) tests between 2015 and 2016. |

Note: ACR = urinary albumin to creatinine ratio; DM = diabetes mellitus; HbA1c = glycosylated haemoglobin; NMDS = National Minimum Dataset (inpatients); NNPAC = National Non-Admitted Patient Collection (outpatients).

## Routine annual revision of the VDR

The newly subsided medications for diabetes, such as Vildagliptin, Empagliflozin, and Dulaglutide have been incorporated into the VDR algorithm at the time the subsidy was implemented.

# Privacy and confidentiality statement

Data users should be aware of their responsibilities for protecting patient confidentiality under the provisions of the Privacy Act 2020 and the Health Information Privacy Code 2020. For Rule 8 of the Code and a commentary on it, see [Appendix 3](#_Appendix_3:_Rule).

Only use the VDR data set internally within your organisation and do not make it available to any other party without our prior consent.

The only exceptions are when you are disseminating summary data through research documents and/or statistical publications. It is then the responsibility of the author(s) of any publications to ensure that information is not published in a manner that could reasonably be expected to identify any individual concerned.

Data users are responsible for ensuring your computer systems are suitable to securely store any information supplied. For a guide on storage, security, retention and disposal of health information, see <https://www.privacy.org.nz/privacy-act-2020/privacy-principles/>.

Data users should make no attempt to link identifiable information with de-identified information (and vice versa). Identifiable data includes, but is not limited to, NHI number, name and address.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Detailed information on VDR methodology (December 2021)

The VDR counts individuals who had any of the following.

1. Publicly funded hospital discharges between 2012 and 2021, with any of the following diagnosis codes (ICD-10-AM version 6):

E10 – Type 1 diabetes mellitus

E11 – Type 2 diabetes mellitus

E12 – Malnutrition-related diabetes mellitus

E13 – Other specified diabetes mellitus

E14 – Unspecified diabetes mellitus

O240 – Pre-existing diabetes mellitus, Type 1, in pregnancy

O241 – Pre-existing diabetes mellitus, Type 2, in pregnancy

O242 – Pre-existing diabetes mellitus, other specified type, in pregnancy

O243 – Pre-existing diabetes mellitus, unspecified, in pregnancy

Note: Admissions with a code for gestational diabetes are not included.

1. Diabetes ‘education and management’ (purchase unit code of M20006) or diabetes retinal (fundus) screening (purchase unit code of M20007) within the outpatient collection (NNPAC) between 2019 and 2021.
2. Publicly funded pharmaceuticals dispensed within the community on two or more occasions between 2020 and 2021. Pharmaceuticals with the following chemical IDs are included:

1192 Insulin lispro

1247 Acarbose

1567 Glibenclamide

1568 Gliclazide

1569 Glipizide

1570 Glucagon hydrochloride

1648 Insulin neutral

1649 Insulin isophane

1655 Insulin zinc suspension

1794 Metformin hydrochloride

2276 Tolazamide

2277 Tolbutamide

3739 Rosiglitazone

3783 Insulin aspart

3800 Pioglitazone

3857 Insulin glargine

3882 Insulin lispro with insulin lispro protamine

3908 Insulin glulisine

3982 Insulin aspart with insulin aspart protamine

4103 Vildagliptin

4104 Vildagliptin with metformin hydrochloride

4137 Empagliflozin

4138 Empagliflozin with metformin hydrochloride

4149 Dulaglutide

6300 Insulin isophane with insulin neutral

Note: Metformin is also used to treat polycystic ovary syndrome in women aged 12–45 years. Women who are dispensed metformin within this age group have not been included within the VDR. Likewise, because insulin is also used to treat gestational diabetes, women dispensed insulin within 5 months before and two weeks after the birth discharge date of the birth event have not been included.

1. Four or more HbA1c, glycosylated haemoglobin lab tests (lab test code BG2) and two or more ACR tests (lab test code BP8) between 2020 and 2021.

Note: To avoid unintentionally including people with gestational diabetes, the VDR does not include women who had lab HbA1c tests within 9 months before the birth event.

## Appendix 2: Known data quality issues with the VDR

Some of the source data that informs the VDR has not been consistently reported across all the DHBs in New Zealand. A number of data gaps are likely to affect the accuracy of the VDR (in particular with sensitivity/coverage). Apply caution when interpreting any analyses based on the VDR on a regional level.

| DHB | Data sources | Known missing data |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 021 Waitematā | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20006 not reported from January 2019 to March 2020 |
| 022 Auckland | NNPAC | Missing M20006 volumes between January 2018 to June 2019 |
| 042 Lakes | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20007 data not reported |
| 047 Bay of Plenty | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20006 and M20007 data not reported |
| 071 Hawke’s Bay | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20007 data not reported |
| 081 MidCentral | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20007 data not reported |
| 091 Capital & Coast | NNPAC | No volumes reported between December 2018 and March 2020, for purchase unit M20007 reported |
| 092 Hutt Valley | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20007 data not reported |
| 093 Wairarapa | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20007 data not reported |
| 111 West Coast | NNPAC | Purchase unit M20007 data not reported |
|  | Community lab claims data | Some diabetes-related test volumes missing |
| 120 Canterbury | Community lab claims data | Some diabetes-related test volumes missing |

In 2020, the level of diabetes health service activities decreased due to the response to COVID-19 (with a reduction in service utilisation during the lockdown). This may also have affected the accuracy of the VDR.

## Appendix 3: Rule 8 of the Health Information Privacy Code 2020 and commentary

### Rule 8: Accuracy etc of health information to be checked before use or disclosure

1. A health agency that holds health information must not use or disclose that information without taking any steps that are, in the circumstances, reasonable to ensure that the information is accurate, up to date, complete, relevant and not misleading.
2. This rule applies to health information obtained before or after the commencement of this code.

### Commentary

Rule 8 aims to protect individuals by requiring agencies that hold health information to check its accuracy before using it. What checking an agency must do will vary depending on matters such as:

the proposed use of the information

the age of the information and the reliability of its source

the practicalities of verifying accuracy or currency

the probability, severity and extent of potential harm for the individual if the information is inaccurate.

#### Purpose of using the information

The steps that it is reasonable to take to check information will vary depending on the proposed use. If the user is going to aggregate the information for statistical purposes, they may need to do only a few or no checks, particularly if the checking process would unnecessarily intrude on the individual’s privacy. By contrast, rigorous checks will be appropriate if decisions on health care entitlements or treatment alternatives are to be based on that information.

#### Accuracy and completeness of information collected directly

It is important to have accurate health information for all the purposes it is used for – care and treatment, administration, monitoring quality of care, training and education.

Reasonable steps for ensuring accuracy might include:

having individuals check the accuracy of the health information they supply at the time it is collected

informing individuals of their own responsibility to keep their name and address information up to date

where information is computerised, adopting a data outlier program to identify when data falls outside expected ranges and values

training staff appropriately.

#### Accuracy and completeness of information from another health agency

It may be more difficult for health agencies to ensure accuracy and completeness of information they receive from another health agency, rather than collected it directly from individuals. If the information is going to be used, agencies dealing directly with the individual concerned should check the accuracy of the information with the individual at an early opportunity, if practicable. Also consider recording the source of the information on the file.

#### Keeping information up to date

In developing procedures to update health information, health agencies need to consider whether:

the individual might be harmed if the information is out of date

treatment might be affected if the information is out of date

disclosing updated information to a health agency that is permitted to receive it might lead the agency to treat the individual differently.

Agencies should check information that is likely to change, such as an address – perhaps at each encounter with the individual.

## Appendix 4: Definitions of VDR variables

| Variable | Description | Source |
| --- | --- | --- |
| DM inpatient (count of events) | The number of publicly funded hospitalisation discharges that contain any diagnosis related to diabetes (E10, E11, E13, E14, O240, O241, O242, O243, ICD-10-AM-VI) | NMDS |
| Diabetes management clinic (count of events) | The number of outpatient events that contain an education management purchase unit code (M20006) | NNPAC |
| Diabetes retinal screening (count of events) | The number of outpatient events that contain a diabetes retinal screening purchase unit code (M20007) | NNPAC |
| DM retinal screening in last 2 years (count of events) | The number of outpatient events that contain a diabetes retinal screening purchase unit code (M20007) with a date of service in the time period | NNPAC |
| DM pharm dispense (count of events) | The number of pharmaceutical dispensings for the chemical IDs listed in step five (chemical ID = 1192, 1247, 1567, 1568, 1569, 1648, 1649, 1655, 1794, 2276, 2277, 3739, 3783, 3800, 3857, 3882, 3908, 3982, 6300, 4103, 4104, 4137, 4138, 4149) | Pharms |
| DM pharm metformin (count of events) | The number of pharmaceutical dispensings where the chemical ID = 1794 | Pharms |
| DM pharm insulin (count of events) | The number of pharmaceutical dispensings where the chemical ID = 1192, 1648, 1649, 1655, 3783, 3857, 3882, 3908, 3982, 6300 | Pharms |
| DM pharm sulfonylurea (count of events) | The number of pharmaceutical dispensings where the chemical ID = 1567, 1568, 1569, 2276, 2277 | Pharms |
| DM pharm sensitiser (count of events) | The number of pharmaceutical dispensings where the chemical ID = 3739, 3800 | Pharms |
| DM pharm other (count of events) | The number of pharmaceutical dispensings where the chemical ID = 1247, 4103, 4104, 4137, 4138, 4149 | Pharms |
| LAB HBA1C (count of events) | The number of laboratory tests where the lab test code = BG2 | Labs |
| LAB ACR (count of events) | The number of laboratory tests where the lab test code = BP8 | Labs |
| Practice name | PHO practice name | PHO enrolment |
| PHO name | PHO name | PHO enrolment |
| PHO ID | PHO identifier | PHO enrolment |
| PRACTICE ID | PHO practice identifier | PHO enrolment |
| Lead DHB | DHB of service: The DHB responsible for funding the PHO | PHO enrolment |
| DHBDOM PHO | DHB of service: The DHB where the person’s primary PHO (GP practice) is located | PHO enrolment |
| PHO | Where the person is enrolled at a PHO during the quarter, show ‘PHO\_Enrolled’; otherwise show null | PHO enrolment |
| PHO enrolled in year | Indicates if an individual has been enrolled in a PHO at any point during the calendar year | PHO enrolment |
| Date of birth | Date of birth of person | NHI |
| Date of death | Date of death. If not died, will be missing | NHI |
| Gender | Gender | NHI |
| Ethnicity 1 | Ethnicity code 1. Level 2 ethnicity | NHI |
| Ethnicity 2 | Ethnicity code 2. Level 2 ethnicity | NHI |
| Ethnicity 3 | Ethnicity code 3. Level 2 ethnicity | NHI |
| Prioritised ethnicity group | Ethnicity is prioritised in the order: Māori, Pacific, Asian, MELAA, European, Other | NHI |
| Domicile code | Domicile code from the person’s address of residence | NHI |
| NZ Dep06 | Mapped from the domicile code on the NHI | NHI |
| NZ Dep13 | Mapped from the domicile code on the NHI | NHI |
| NZ Dep 18 | Mapped from the domicile code on the NHI | NHI |
| Month yr of death | If an individual was alive at any point during the calendar year, the value in this column will equal month and year of death | NHI |
| DOMDHBN | DHB of domicile code mapped from the domicile code from the domicile address on the NHI | NHI |
| Age | Calculated as at 31 December of the relevant year, based on date of birth from NHI | NHI |
| Inpatient first identification date | The admission date of the first publicly funded diabetes-related hospitalisation event (any diagnosis of E10, E11, E13, E14, O240, O241, O242, O243) | NMDS |
| Inpatient last identification date | The admission date of the last publicly funded diabetes-related hospitalisation event (any diagnosis of E10, E11, E13, E14, O240, O241, O242, O243) | NMDS |
| Outpatient first identification date | The date of service of the first diabetes-related outpatient event (purchase unit code = M20006, M20007) | NNPAC |
| Outpatient last identification date | The date of service of the last diabetes-related outpatient event (purchase unit code = M20006, M20007) | NNPAC |
| Pharm first identification date | The dispense date of the first diabetes-related dispensing (chemical ID = 1192, 1247, 1567, 1568, 1569, 1648, 1649, 1655, 1794, 2276, 2277, 3739, 3783, 3800, 3857, 3882, 3908, 3982, 6300, 4103, 4104, 4137, 4138, 4149) | Pharms |
| Pharm last identification date | The dispense date of the last diabetes-related dispensing (chemical ID = 1192, 1247, 1567, 1568, 1569, 1648, 1649, 1655, 1794, 2276, 2277, 3739, 3783, 3800, 3857, 3882, 3908, 3982, 6300, 4103, 4104, 4137, 4138, 4149) | Pharms |
| Lab first identification date | The lab visit date of the first HbA1c or ACR test (lab test code = BG2, BP8) | Labs |
| Lab last identification date | The lab visit date of the last HbA1c or ACR test (lab test code = BG2, BP8) | Labs |
| First identification date | The first date out of the inpatient, outpatient, Pharms and Labs dates listed above |  |
| DM related traces | Summary of which collections events found in (Inpatient, Outpatient, Pharms, Lab) |  |
| Ethnic name4 | Ethnicity grouped into European/Other, Māori, Pacific people, Indian | NHI |
| Ethnicity MnM | Ethnicity grouped into Māori or non-Māori | NHI |
| Age group | Five-year age group | NHI |
| DOMDHB\_name | DHB of domicile name (mapped from the domicile code on the NHI) | NHI |
| Live | Show live if person is alive as at 31 December of the VDR year, ie, for VDR2021 DOD is null or greater than 31/12/20201 | NHI |
| Year | VDR year |  |
| Count\_VDR (count of people) | Count of people on the VDR |  |

Note: DHB = district health board; DM = diabetes mellitus; MELAA = Middle Eastern, Latin American, African; NHI = National Health Index; NMDS = National Minimum Dataset (inpatients); NNPAC = National Non-Admitted Patient Collection (outpatients); Pharms = Pharmaceutical Collection; PHO = primary health organisation.