

Media release

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Moving to Wairarapa gave me my health

Hira Renata considers himself one of the lucky ones. He received an invitation to participate in the National Bowel Screening Programme. The invitation letter for Hira arrived in the mail in June this year.

“Congratulations, you are one of the first to be a part of the National Bowel Screening Programme...” it said.”

“My generation, especially men, don’t seem to think about needing to take any test. We all think we will be fine,” Hira said. But Hira has a family history of cancer, and he knew better. His father passed away at 60 from cancer of the gullet and, of his father’s seven brothers, six of them have died from various cancers.

Hira has outlived his father by three years already. He recognises a few health issues he needs to be mindful of, like high bloody pressure, high cholesterol, and he thinks a little weight loss wouldn’t go amiss, however he had no bowel symptoms he was aware of.

Hira did his home bowel screening test on a Sunday, sending the test kit back in the mail in the free post envelope supplied the next day.

Not quite two weeks later he received a call saying he ‘shouldn’t panic’ but blood had been identified in his faecal sample and he needed to have a colonoscopy. “I was told they only need to take a look and this is all part of a normal process,” he said. “But you still have those fears in the back of your mind.”

“I had to let my boss know I needed time off work for the appointment. His sister had been through the process previously, so he was very understanding,” Hira said.

A colonoscopy requires three days preparation, including the need for a special diet.

“You need to stop eating for a day, then the next day you need to drink a lot of liquid that flushes your system. You need to stay at home - you can’t be anywhere else than as close to the toilet as possible! After that, it was off to Wellington to see the specialist doctor.”

“The colonoscopy itself is very quick and easy and was actually no worse than getting your teeth done at a dentist!,” Hira said.

Hira’s colonoscopy revealed a polyp which was immediately removed and sent to a laboratory for testing. He was advised that on a scale of one to ten, ten being the highest, there was a level eight risk of the polyp being cancerous.

It was, and Hira had a further check for any remaining tissue from the polyp removal, just to be sure. “Again I was told to not worry, it was just to be on the safe side and the good thing was that it was found, removed and the job was done before it could turn into a problem.”

“My wife and I had not included the children in the process, not wanting to cause them any anxiety or have them panic,” Hira said. “However after being called back to Wellington for a second time, the whānau knew something was up, and they called a family meeting. It was right that we talked through the process and took away their concerns,” he said. “Now we realise we should have included them right from the start, when I first did the test,” he said. They were all very supportive once they knew.”

“My goal is to be around for my whānau when they need me,” said Hira. “I wan’t to see my moko’s grow, at least to teenage years! My youngest has only just turned one.”

Hira credits his move to Wairarapa for his health. “Wairarapa is so great to have this bowel screening opportunity,” he said. “Imagine if I hadn’t taken this test, what might have happened for me,” he said.

“My advice for anyone receiving the test pack in the mail, is simple. Do the check, it couldn’t be easier, and it saves lives.”

Fulton Hogan champions bowel screening

Fulton Hogan is a strong advocate of the bowel screening programme, and encourages its eligible staff to participate in the programme, and others to advocate for their eligible friends and whānau to get on board.

“The bowel screening programme supports all our staff values,” said Paul Smart, Branch Manager. “It’s about living safely at work, and at home. It saves lives, it keeps our staff safe, and it’s simple, free and local.”

Bowel screening nurse, Fiona Cundy, said she felt privileged to be invited into the staff meeting to share information and answer questions about the screening programme. “We rolled out the programme in Wairarapa in August last year and have had more than 4800 participate,” she said. “While Wairarapa is doing the best in the country in terms of uptake, there are still 30% percent of the eligible population that haven’t taken up the invitation to screen.

“While we know that screening is not right for everyone, we really want to encourage participation for those who should do the test.”

Colleague Janeen Cross agrees. “Māori are slower to take up the invitation to screen, and our 60-65 year olds are also a little under-represented in the programme at only 65% participating,” she said. “The older groups are above 70%.”

“When the test kits come in the mail, they are no good on top of the fridge waiting ‘for a good time’ to do it,” Fiona said. “The ideal time is right when you get it. Test kits have a six month expiry date so it’s really important to get on and do it.”

Fiona and Janeen are happy to meet with businesses and community groups to explain how the programme works. “Many employers have 60-65 year olds on their workforce, and if not, their staff have friends and family that are eligible. The more we can talk about bowel screening, the more comfortable people can be with it and the better the health outcomes for our people,” said Janeen.

“Fulton Hogan is behind the bowel screening programme 100%,” said Smart. “I challenge all other employers to support this health initiative and educate their staff on the benefits of screening.”

About bowel screening

We have one of the highest bowel cancer rates in the developed world. It is the second most common cause of cancer death in New Zealand. The earlier it is diagnosed, the higher the chance of survival.

60 -74 year old men and women are eligible to be screened and an invitation will come by mail, on or within a few months of your birthday.

The test is done in private at your own home and posted away to be tested. Follow the simple instructions. Once you have completed a test, you will stay on the screening schedule until your 75th birthday.

There may be no warning signs that you have bowel cancer. Common signs and symptoms of bowel cancer may include changes in the normal pattern of going to the toilet that continues for several weeks (such as diarrhea, constipation or feeling that your bowel doesn't empty completely) or blood in bowel motions.

Screening is for people that do not have symptoms, and are not on a surveillance schedule already. If you are experiencing symptoms you are concerned about, see your GP. Do not wait for the screening invitation.

ENDS

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