

Media release, Wairarapa Times Age

Health services collaborate against COVID-19

17 April 2020

Wairarapa’s response to COVID-19 seems to have been a great success so far. We have had eight cases and all have recovered without need for hospital intervention.

On the surface, it might appear that our local healthcare services have not been affected overly much by the global pandemic, but this could not be further from the truth, as Wairarapa District Health Board’s Chief Executive, Dale Oliff, explains.

“Right across the healthcare spectrum, we have had to adapt our practice to meet the additional demand of COVID-19,” she said.

“We are fortunate in our region to have excellent relationships with our primary healthcare and community partners, which allows us to be readily flexible and agile in dealing with emerging situations, like we are seeing with this response.”

“Our medical practices and our hospital services have had to implement significant change, all of which impacts on the staff team as well as our patients. We have had to create a single entry point into the hospital, manned 24/7, and ask everyone coming in screening questions before we can allow access. Anybody that is symptomatic is triaged and dealt with separately, in isolation and with PPE gear.”

“Even just getting into and out of the PPE gear takes a considerable amount of time,” Dale said.

“We haven’t had a confirmed COVID-19 case in Wairarapa Hospital, but we have had to treat almost 50 patients in the last three weeks as if they have had the virus until their tests return negative. This means keeping them in isolation in our negative pressure rooms, tightly controlling staffing rosters and introducing rigid cleaning regimes.”

While the impact on hospital staff is significant, the COVID-19 response has also affected patients and their family and whanau.

“Our patients are heavily restricted in terms of visitors, and that takes its toll on them. Very unwell people are going without the morale boost of family and friends to pass the time with,” Dale said.

“It is a trying time for all, but I am really pleased with how all the staff are coping – and I am including our Orderlies, Security, Cleaners and Receptionists in that too,” she said.

“It is very much a team effort and it is a great team we have. I am continuously impressed by the responsible, mature and good natured approach being taken by the whole staffing unit.”



That team is broad. The healthcare and community partners the Chief Executive mentions include not only medical practices and public health; but also ambulance, pharmacy, dentists, aged residential care, mental health and community providers, as well as police, councils and volunteers – an almost endless list of organisations and individuals working together against COVID-19.

Justine Thorpe, Deputy CEO Tu Ora Compass Health, agrees with Dale when it comes to the collaboration behind the scenes and attributes Wairarapa’s good results so far to the collective work of many.

“Our medical practices and pharmacies are being innovative in the way they are working to meet community needs while working within the restrictions of lockdown,” she said.

“Our COVID-19 testing clinics are testing more cases here than anywhere else, because we have been working to a broad case definition for some time. Staff are in PPE for long periods and working in a way we are not used to working, but the Wairarapa ‘just get on with it’ attitude takes over and everyone is working together well and with good humour.”

“I agree that the strong relationships we are able to maintain in a small region are invaluable at times like this. We can move fast, we can make decisions, and we can quickly act on information that we readily share,” Justine said.

Both health leaders believe that there will be some good things come out of the COVID-19 response.

“Our healthcare organisations have been forced into quite significant digital advancements,” Justine explains.

“In lockdown we have been providing phone and video consultation for our regular patients. So often, people coming into the clinic don’t really need to be physically there. Our doctors and healthcare professionals know them, they know what they need, and they are just as able to discuss those needs over the phone as they are face to face.”

“The use of digital tools to manage outpatient appointments and follow-up is a welcome outcome of this COVID-19 response,” Dale Oliff agrees.

“There is opportunity in adversity. We are seeing ways that we can serve our community better, and we can move forward from that.”

The one takeaway that both Dale and Justine say they cannot stress enough is that Wairarapa needs to keep up its good work.

“It is far too soon to say we have done well, we are COVID-19 free and we can relax now,” Justine cautions. “We can’t. The teams are out there in our six testing facilities are testing people with COVID-19 symptoms every single day and any one of those tests could come back positive.”

“Everyone needs to know that, while we may have no active cases now, that can change with just one lab test.”

“The message is simple,” Dale says. “Our teams are working extremely hard to keep up our COVID-free status and we need every single person in Wairarapa to work hard too.”

As the Wairarapa DHB daily COVID-19 update says, keeping our community safe is everyone’s responsibility. Anyone experiencing shortness of breath, fever, or cough should contact their medical centre or Healthline on 0800 358 5453 for advice and referral to a COVID-19 testing centre.



Wairarapa DHB COVID-19

17 April 2020



Wairarapa has NO active cases of COVID-19
Wairarapa reports 8 cases recovered
No patients with COVID-19 have been treated in our hospital
...but we cannot be complacent...

- Wairarapa people are being tested for COVID-19 daily
- As testing continues, new cases can emerge
- If you are unwell with COVID-19 symptoms or another illness, call Healthline 0800 358 5453 or call your GP
- New Zealand remains at alert level 4. We must continue to stay home, stay in our bubble, keep physical distancing and stay vigilant

Keeping our community safe is everyone's responsibility

Photo captions:

1. Registered Nurse, Min Nah in PPE in the ante room of a negative pressure isolation room
2. Dr Mizpa Essed swabs for the virus at a COVID-19 testing centre in Masterton

