



Karanga Atawhai

A newsletter for Sisters of Mercy and partners in mission

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Adjusting to critical times part of Mercy's founding story

Like organisations around the world, Mercy ministries in New Zealand have had to adjust to a new normal in the past three months. Some plans have been postponed or cancelled; fund-raising appeals have gone online; schools and community hubs have closed.

Living through a pandemic is not new for Mercy. Hardly had the Congregation been founded when Dublin was overrun by a cholera epidemic in 1832; thousands succumbed to the illness and Catherine McAuley was quick to offer the services of her sisters who nursed for many months in a temporary hospital.

Biographer Mary Sullivan rsm notes that 'the mere presence of the sisters assured patients and their families that despite appearances and the suddenness of death, no one was poisoned or deliberately buried alive' (*The Path of Mercy*, p.118).

Life is already returning to some kind of normality, though different from what we may have known. The pace of our journey towards a PJP will quicken, with a meeting of the Sponsorship Committee scheduled for mid-June. In the meantime, here are some Covid-19 front-line reports.

Mercy residential care - heroes work here

By DENNIS HORTON

Springing up outside health care facilities in many countries throughout the Covid-19 crisis have been signs declaring 'Heroes work here'. With lockdown conditions now eased to Level 2, we asked residential care CEO Ann Coughlan to share some insights on how the past three months have been for staff and residents at the facility she leads, Waiaatarua Mercy Parklands in Ellerslie.

She admits it is a struggle to know where to start. "But at the top of the list are the facts that most Covid-19 victims are frail elderly and a number of deaths have occurred in aged care homes in New Zealand.

"We have had to run our facility parallel to running a pandemic plan. The workload has increased hugely and has stretched resources while we faced this unprecedented challenge. We have developed new ways of working - streamlined systems, working from home and creating different roster systems for our 24/7 staffing. Our use of telemedicine has escalated, allowing us to connect with GPs and other service providers in a responsible



and coordinated way, and this will definitely be a new way of working in the future."

There has been a huge focus on the wellbeing of staff and residents alike, says Ann. "Many education sessions were provided to both groups, on what Covid-19 really is, on how we can protect ourselves and what we can do to flatten the curve.

"We held an extra daily stand-up meeting where the representatives of all employee groups were present to discuss how to deal with Covid-19 while continuing to provide safe and compassionate care to residents. Issues included how staff could keep to their bubble, practise social distancing, update on respiratory education and hand hygiene, staff wellness, testing, supply chain and HR issues, roster changes, chaplaincy coverage, PPE (personal protection equipment), flu vaccinations, skills relating to skyping, admissions, transfers and deaths during Lockdown.

"A further challenge was to clarify how best to contain a case of Covid-19 should we have one. This was indeed a challenge for us, in a care facility with 97 beds and only five ensuites. Everyone was at risk, and we had to minimise exposure, not only to our residents but to care staff, and strike a balance in continuing to provide the care that was needed."

Ann lists the outstanding gain. "We prevented the virus from coming into Mercy Parklands. On a lighter note, we did not have to deal with the usual Auckland traffic problems." And, thanks to the No One Dies Alone programme introduced to the facility over recent years, **continued on page 2*

Happy to hear from you

Your responses to any items in this newsletter are welcome. If you have any questions or comments, you are invited to send these directly to either Astrid Lambert (ALambert@somauck.org.nz) or to Richard Kerr-Bell (rkerrbell@somauck.org.nz).

Mercy residential care - heroes work here

**from front page*

none of their residents died without the comforting presence of staff trained in palliative care. "No one died alone."

During the lockdown period the facility managed three virtual audits - one led by the Auckland District Health Board, another by the Ministry of Health and the

third a financial audit undertaken by the accounting professionals KPMG. The ADHB also conducted on-site Covid-19 testing.

"Phew," Ann concludes. "Mercy champions indeed! This is not about me; it took everyone."

Providing spiritual care in pandemic conditions

Sister of Mercy Sheryl James provides spiritual care to residents at Waiatarua Mercy Parklands, the Mercy aged care hospital in Ellerslie. She is also a member of the Finance working party for our ministerial PJP. Finding new ways of offering care to residents has been her biggest challenge during the Covid-19 lockdown.

"We have used a wide range of technologies - Skype, messenger videos, Facetime and phone calls - to help residents keep connected to families and friends in the outside world. Staff have become family as they have continued throughout the lockdown to give compassionate and loving care."

"For Mother's Day there were numerous bouquets delivered by the courier to our front door; we became the 'post woman' taking the flowers, delivering emails and reading them to residents. Spiritual and pastoral care gave us the chance to lift their spirits."

Technology became an important link throughout the Easter season, with online services offered in the chapel. "But instead of an overflowing congregation we had to invite nine people at a time to meet the social distancing required. Some days we held four services, so that all residents had the chance to attend."

Celebrating funerals for those who died - though not related to Covid-19 - during the lockdown was especially challenging, says Sheryl. "We provided a small service of prayer and farewell with one family member present, while staff and residents waited along the corridor and other family members gathered outside the window. It all seemed so impersonal, and my heart was heavy with grief at these times."

Sheryl notes that a ministry in aged care has been especially rewarding during the Covid-19 pandemic. "It has meant working among a group of very vulnerable people, with an opportunity to understand more deeply the works of mercy - visiting the sick, praying for the dead and supporting their families. Often I felt powerless and lost for words to describe being in mercy together."

"Covid-19 has certainly been a time of uncertainty when our commitment to be a loving presence has been the aim. I have felt encouraged by the witness and words of Catherine McAuley. Each day brought its own challenges and unexpected duties, but it was all about finding a way to respond to the needs before me."

The image of the church described by Pope Francis as a field hospital, healing people's wounds and warming their hearts before talking about anything else, is one that Sheryl has carried with her. "It has been a privilege to be among the sick and to minister to them during this time. To ensure that they did not feel cast aside because family couldn't come to visit or because the priest couldn't celebrate Mass. It has been about finding alternatives."

She cites the example of being with a group of residents in the chapel, watching a funeral service online. "One resident said it all; she said that it was like being there, and we were. Yet in a way we weren't. We had a community about us. We were blessed in being able to participate."

"We have been called to support our residents and journey with them during the lockdown. It has taken time and energy to listen to God's call to minister in a new way, beyond anything we could have imagined, and to act without hesitation when the need arose."

Aged care is an essential work of mercy, says Sheryl James. "Those in care are vulnerable members of society. Many of them come with the hope of finding their home, and it is an honour to journey with them as they walk this path of healing and acceptance. To see them come to the moment of peace and serenity brings joy to my soul."

"I have a strong belief that the ministry in aged care is as relevant today as it was in Catherine's day. It is a ministry in which we as mercy women can make a difference to other lives. It is a call to make a space in our hearts for another."

"As we go forward with our ministerial PJP, aged care witnesses to the way Whānau Mercy enables us to work together. We are able, in Catherine's words, "to act with great tenderness, allowing others with tranquillity to give every thought to God alone."

