An Open Letter to Our Community from Health Te Aroha

Hi Everyone

What a strange world we live in at the moment. We hope you are all going well and have not had too many arguments with your loved ones after being confined with them for so long.

We thought it timely to update you all on what has been happening in the practice over the last six weeks. Things have changed regularly and often. We are pleased that, due to the Health Care Home model, transition to virtual health has been relatively seamless. Overnight we were asked to go from normal functioning to complete virtual appointments, only seeing those patients who were acutely unwell. This has seen us change a number of things such as:

* For repeat scripts, we usually like to have seen the patient in the last six months for review. For Levels 3 and 4 we have lengthened this out to 12 months.
* Initially Pathlab was closed, however it opened again after a few days and since then we have been doing only absolutely required bloods.
* Routine health care such as smears, cardiovascular risk assessments, ear clinics, school clinics, diabetes annual reviews etc were stopped during Level 4. Smears are starting back up for Level 3 with a focus on high risk patients.
* A concierge at the front door checking patients are well before entering the building.
* ‘Flu vaccine clinics with social distancing, no 20-minute wait for low risk patients (or 20 minute wait in car if at risk), a separate entrance to the building and an MCA (medical care assistant) out on the road directing the ‘flu vaccine patient flow.
* Limiting at risk staff from patient contact.
* Physical distancing and reduction in risk of infection at the front desk by stopping cash payments, 2m barrier from the front desk with hand sanitiser before and after use of the eftpos machine.
* Opening of the CBAC (community-based assessment centre) at the Silver Fern Event Centre with one of our doctors posted there.
* We have taken on a bigger load of general care given that a lot of other health care providers are closed or on limited services. This includes services such as dental issues, mental health support, and dealing with patients who need hospital specialist appointments but have been unable to get them due to reduced outpatients services.
* Emailing of scripts to the pharmacy (this may seem like an easy thing, but privacy requirements etc make this harder than you would think………)

We have never seen anything like this, and it is likely to change the face of general practice for good. We are pleased to say that while this has been a taxing time financially, as we try to help people who are facing financial hardship, we have not had to lay off any staff or reduce any hours, as other practices around the country have needed to. This is really important to us as we have amazing staff who have worked hard, putting themselves at risk, staffing the CBAC, and it really is like a family here. We cannot be over enthusiastic about how they have stepped up and supported our community at their own personal risk and have done it with smiles, respect and care. We feel fortunate to have jobs when so many are struggling.

Our community is doing OK however we are starting to see a number of patients who are feeling the lack of social contact and we would encourage you to pass this through your networks. If people have elderly neighbours, people with mental health issues or people who live alone, around them, a phone call or a wave and a chat (allowing for social distancing and less than 10 minutes) at this point is really important.

Moving forward there will be more changes. As we drop to Level 2 it is likely that we will look at increasing routine care, however things are unlikely to go back to “normal” for 12 – 18 months, if at all. During these changes we know it’s difficult for patients to keep up with the rapid pace of change

(it’s difficult for us too!).

Level 2 will also mean a few changes

* All patients will need to talk to someone before entering the practice to check their symptoms. This will mostly mean a phonecall, however you will also see a friendly face at the front door, asking questions about symptoms of respiratory illness
* If you have respiratory symptoms, you will be kept separate from other patients, and asked to wait in your car, or come at the end of the day. Most people with respiratory illness at this time of year will have normal winter coughs and colds, not coronavirus, but we need to protect the vulnerable patients from all viral illness. You may be given a mask when you arrive, and the doctor may well have some level of protective equipment on. You may also be asked to enter the practice through a separate entrance.
* If you do not have a respiratory illness, you will be advised where to sit in the waiting room so that you are socially distancing from others
* Hand sanitizer will be available and need to be used.
* Face to face appointments will be kept to less than 10 mins to reduce the risk of passing on the virus.
* We will be still be doing as much as we can over the phone, so any need to come into the practice can be targeted and short (eg: an examination)
* The blood pressure kiosk will be open and we have some disposable sleeves available for patients to use.
* We are also investigating different IT options for video consultations so watch this space!

Patients are welcome to ring if they need anything and we will tell them how to get it. As this changes on an almost daily basis, this is really the best way if they have any questions. It is really important to understand that if you have health concerns, we want you to make contact. Please do not sit at home, on symptoms. We can keep you safe in the practice and happy to discuss how we manage this with you, prior to coming in to the practice.

We are trying to encourage as many people as possible to use the patient portal, My Indici. This technology allows us to send out bulk emails regarding important information and is a great way to get our message out in a widespread way. We also have our facebook page and website but realize these are not for everyone. Otherwise mass communication has been difficult with papers not being circulated and meeting places closed. Feel free to pass on that we are just a phone call away!

There is always a silver lining to every cloud, and for us this has been the increase in virtual consulting. Our patients have, in six weeks, developed an understanding of this that we have not managed to achieve with three years of advertising. We want to continue this into the future as this reduces time lost by patients in the waiting room, thereby valuing their time much more. It also prevents a lot of unnecessary travel (which is good for the planet) and we want to continue to prevent waiting rooms full of coughing patients.

With the upcoming election, we would ask for your advocacy in supporting general practice with our politicians. We really feel it would be fair to say that general practice in Te Aroha (and we include the local Te Korowai practice in this comment) has been the backbone of health services in this community through these trying times. We are adamant that general practice is an exceptionally important part of a strong future medical service for New Zealand.

We would also like to acknowledge the pharmacy, who have been extremely busy and have worked really hard with us to ensure that patients have received their medications in as timely and safe method as possible. Kenwyn Rest Home and Te Aroha Hospital have also done a great job of keeping our elderly safe through this time where they are so high risk.

On a personal note, we and our families are all well. We have had incredible support from our community with many patients asking how we are going, thanking us for the good work, and supporting us as we support them. This is what we are here for, this is what we are trained for and when you sign up for a health care career, there is always the possibility that you will be required to put your patients ahead of yourself. This is one of the privileges of the career we have chosen.

So, keep yourselves safe and we look forward to seeing you in person at some time, as we all miss catching up with our patients.

Hayley and Brendon

Health Te Aroha