

Blog: 28th May, 2023

Covid-19 is still around but those catching it now, often for the first time, are having a much milder run with the current dumbed down Omicron variants and none of our patients have required hospitalisation now for many months. Mind you admission to Middlemore does still run the risk of also contracting Covid-19 as a couple of our patients have recently found out, with the crowded and overburdened A and E and long waits exacerbating the problem.

Influenza unfortunately is causing a worse illness. As Ma used to say Influenza lasts 7 days if you treat it, and a week if you don't. Already in April I admitted 2 patients to hospital with complications. We have not seen the A: Darwin here yet but I sure as many head to Queensland for a welcome respite from winter cold and rain it will come back with them. Our current fluvax protects against this as well as two strains currently circulating, A: Victoria and B: Phuket.

While the fluvax isn't totally protective- certainly not nearly as effective as the Covid-19 or shingles vaccinations all because of the flu virus having a jelly coating- it is in the range of 70-77% so is worthwhile. Vaccination not only reduces the impact and complication risk if someone vaccinated is unfortunate enough to still contract influenza but also it helps build a protective library of resistance against future strains. The World Health Organisation which maintains an early warning network and surveillance of strains to help prevent another pandemic has notified the strains for the Northern Hemispheres coming winter, and for the first time they are the virtually same as ones we are using at the moment. The only differences is they are still going after A:Wisconsin whereas our A:Victoria is very closely related to A: Wisconsin and derived from it. This shows the impact of air travel and how widespread people movement speeds the spread of viruses around the world. So if you have not been vaccinated yet, our nurses can do it for you.

We have new staff starting in the next month. The first you will meet is Eseta on the front desk. Eseta is Samoan born but been here for 20 years, and is a very experienced medical receptionist. She is local and says she is looking forward to coming to work on an e-scooter! I will introduce Eseta, and Claire, our new healthcare assistant [who will also be helping on the reception desk] more thoroughly in the next blog.

Like all businesses we have had increased costs this year. Since Spark bought out our medical IT provider and Cloud server our costs of IT in the last year alone have gone up over 70%, and we were recently sprung with another bill for \$28,000 as they change the base program from Citrix to Google. Wages have gone up – and needed to – but the government has refused to include practice nurses increases in the funding for general practice. Instead they offer 'free' health assistants, navigators and people with basic counselling skills to practices

but no help with costs of having them. We have refused the offer as I do not have the capacity to oversee what they do as well as look after medical and nursing staff and am very doubtful about their level of training. We also lose the right to choose our staff and who fits in and who commits to our standards of excellence. It is a very poorly thought through initiative and further undermines the quality of general practice. I know many of our patients are finding it tough out there too, and we have discussed this and the impact of fees rises. Although we have tried not to go down the route we have chosen we now have to, so instead of increasing the costs of doctors visits, we are going to start charging for consultations with nurses. We will start after Kings Birthday weekend. Our other initiative is we are going to be very strict about appointments not running over the 15 minutes total allotted. That is 15minutes in all including coming in and going out! If you think you are going to need more than 15 minutes as you have more questions and problems then please book a double appointment. It is more efficient than being asked to come back to finish off your list! Most surgeries have been charging for nurse consultations for years and we have resisted, but we can't any longer. It does share the costs better among the users of our services. Immunisations of children and those eligible will still be free, as will be when the nurse triages patients [that is sorts out level of urgency and does basic readings in advance for the doctor]. Practice nurses are no longer someone who often answered the phone and had the ear of the doctor, but highly trained, medically proficient practitioners in their own right.

There was no money for general practice in the Budget despite our continuing loss of doctors and nurses to Australia where more than double/triple our salaries are offered. Their Budget tripled government subsidies in general practice for the young, the sick and the elderly! That is an unfulfilled dream here. And yet here another great re-organisation of the Health Sector with the abolition of DHBs and establishment of Te Whatu Ora is costing a lot of money that could have been spent on frontline staff and can't hide the fact that it's just the same administration people in newly named jobs, and the underlying problem is that there just is not enough money to run quality healthcare in New Zealand.

I applaud the caution in the budget, and accept the devastating floods which destroyed so much infrastructure need funding, but the workforces of Health and Education are being eroded severely. I still can't find a locum, and if we have this problem in Auckland, you can imagine how much worse it must be in rural areas.

Not far to the shortest day too: the year seems to clip along faster and faster as I get older.....at least the past couple of fine sunny days even with the cold wind made me feel better. And we haven't had a frost yet. Usually I am a bit maudlin by the end of May as I contemplate a frost damaged plant I didn't think to cover.

Maybe the switch back to La Nina weather might give a bit more like old times this summer before we get the more extreme La Nina weather with its prolonged and intense summer droughts.

Here's hoping...Jacqueline, and all the team at Tiakina Te Ora.