

Blog 5/4/2020

Who would have believed things could change so fast in NZ? Strange times indeed as we all manage going into our second week of lockdown. It was fast: it was only two weekends ago when all general practices were asked to move immediately to virtual consults which caught many by surprise.

We not only managed but it's amazing how successfully we have continued to look after our patients just with phone consults, sometimes emailed pictures, and occasional the physical visit to the surgery of a patient. I'm sure we look very scary gowned up, mask and goggles on with hair covered and gloves...but whatever it takes to keep us up and running and able to continue to be available for our patients, as well as protect them from us transmitting this sometimes deadly virus to them.

That is what happened in Northern Italy where general practice in Lombardy fell over within three weeks. Waiting rooms were an excellent place to get coughed over, and then the doctors all went sick. We are very lucky to be later down the spread of the pandemic and be able to learn the lessons in time to take the measures needed to minimise the spread and the human cost of this new illness.

We managed to get webcams and systems up for video consults, only to eventually find out we did not have the bandwidth available to stream these. Spark/Appserv, our Cloud Provider, can't give us an estimated time for expansion of this other than say a vague 5-6 weeks. Some of it is our fault to be fair. We didn't understand we had very restricted bandwidth of 2Mb or its implications and turned down the opportunity to widen it last July as it was extra costs coming just after we finally bought our seriously rundown building and were looking at the large open-ended costs involved in tackling the downpour of water which poured in through the downstairs ceiling and off light fittings. The rotten ceiling and walls upstairs as well as in Dr Mick's old surgery.

We are on the list to go up to 50Mb bandwidth and will go ahead with a permanent system for video consults. We are very thankful and grateful for the help of my stepson Cameron upskilling us in the modern technology and helping us implement it. I can't see the Medical Council retreating from the decision made two weeks ago to allow them, and the convenience for patients is enormous, even after lockdown, even after this pandemic has eventually eased off. So it will be permanent implementation: not just a cobbled together temporary fix. But I do hanker to get back to seeing, talking and being able to examine our patients in person.

How do virtual consults work?

Just ring and make an appointment as you normally would. At that time or as near as possible the doctor will ring you. Most of the time we seem to be able to work it out together. Scripts are arranged, faxed direct to the pharmacy and available within the hour. Sick notes are printed, signed and I have been then taking a photo and sending it back to the patient on the same cell phone I talked with them on. Which means they can quickly relay it on to their boss. A hard copy is then put in an envelope and posted out. I sometimes ask patients to take pictures of the problem we are discussing, especially rashes and infections, and once I get them I ring back, [the two calls still count as one consultation]. I realise not everyone uses capable cell phones, but even landlines work well. If you prefer to take calls on your landline, please let us know when you book an appointment, if you can give us any updated numbers and your email it helps a lot too.

Occasionally I do need to see someone. Then we arrange a face-to -face appointment. It might not be with me. It might be with a nurse, for instance to suction or syringe a blocked ear. We arrange then what door to come in, and minimise the contacts you have with staff, and always will be

wearing appropriate protective gear. If laboratory tests are needed, we fax these directly to the nearest open Labtests near you, and you can go there directly for bloods to be taken. Papakura Labtests and Takanini Labtests [Walters Road there opposite the Warehouse] is working on restricted hours 7am-4pm Monday to Friday and 8-12 Saturday mornings. The laboratories have severely restricted the range of tests they do so they can gear up to do more SARS-CoV-2 swab testing so we are delaying and limiting our Laboratory testing. Children's sore throats we treat with antibiotics straight away even without the benefit of culturing throat swabs for Streptococcus A: otherwise we risk an outbreak of Rheumatic fever in those under 25 years but particularly the 4-19 year olds and cope with the subsequent heart damage down the line. The Radiology services in the community work in the same way as the labs in practicing a restricted entry/ no sitting around waiting rooms and are markedly restricting hours, even as they are far less busy with no sport and less cars on roads to produce injuries while under lockdown!

Our practice manager is billing consultations so you don't have to come in and spend more time in our building, even though we now have protective perspex screens up over our office. Meriana is sending out statements currently by snail mail, but if you have registered your email with us, she is doing it that way too. On the invoice there is our internet banking number which is a fast and secure way to pay if you can - just please identify yourself! In the early days of internet banking we seemed to get paid by anonymous and humorously named Trusts at times and had a hard job linking them with accounts. We are currently billing all virtual consults at the lowest fee, of a quick 10 minute consultation even though most consultations take longer than this. Some consultations will not cost at all, like ones to tell you your nasopharyngeal swab for SARS-Cov-2, the virus that causes Covid-19 is negative. Or follow ups if you are sick with what could be, or is proven to be Covid 19.

Please, if you are caught out seriously by this crisis financially, discuss how we can manage this with Meriana our Practice Manager., and we will still consult with you. Everyone has to have access to medical care through this difficult time whatever the circumstances, and we promise to look after everyone in our practice. We are proud of being old-fashioned quality family doctors who know and care about our patients while we strive to give the best medical care possible.

We know Covid-19 can be more deadly to older people and people with compromised immune systems. This group means patients with co-existing damage to major organs like lungs, hearts and kidneys, and sometimes from drugs we use to damp down over-enthusiastic immune responses as in the group of illnesses we call auto-immune like Rheumatoid Arthritis, Lupus and Psoriasis, or used in people with organ transplants. But younger people are not totally safe also with reports of serious illness and deaths in people under 30 and children from overseas.

So lockdown is in everyone's best interest, even if it hard to communicate to the young adults whose brains are pre-wired to tell them they are bullet proof- that's why armies are composed of this age group- and young children who can't understand [but adapt fast]. One can never tell if they are infectious until the symptoms start, and then they could have infected others for at least two days.

The symptoms can be very mild- marked tiredness in the beginning was the only symptom the patient felt when she came to consult me about another entirely different matter, and only when she started coughing 4 days later was the swab done which came back positive. Which is why the nurse - who triaged her dressed in protective gear- and me who saw her- are still at home in quarantine. Our quarantine of 14 days from contact doesn't end until Tuesday when we both will be back at the surgery, and the good news is our nasopharyngeal swabs [yuk!] were negative.

I have been working from home and the surgery under Meriana's watchful eye has been running

smoothly as usual.

We have been out of Fluvax since Wednesday and were not allowed to even order more until Friday. We are hoping to have more probably delivered late Monday but definitely by Wednesday 8th April. The 10am-12pm Monday to Friday clinics are going well. So far 480 fluvax done for our most vulnerable patients.

Grateful thanks to our hardworking nurses Kay and Paulette for all this hard work and helped along at times by Dr Cathy Latu.

Over this weekend ringing patients about their Covid 19 swabs I have been very impressed with how sensible everyone is being and how fast everyone has adapted. My daughter is co-ordinating a hastily arranged network of now over 200 volunteers in her area who are checking on the elderly and isolated, arranging deliveries from supermarkets and pharmacies, as well as just being a friendly helpful face. I am very proud of her. Even my own Iwi rang up to check I was ok! "Just checking to see if any of our kaumatua needed our help: let us know if you do" the helpful young voice on the phone said. It is amazing how despite often very negative stories in the media there is so much good happening out there. As Jacinda says, be kind- and everything I see and hear shows how much everyone is.

Kia kaha everyone, Be safe, Be well. Jacqueline