

Medical Superintendent Update for the Community

23 April 2020

I would like to thank the staff at NIHRACS for their dedication to not only keeping Norfolk safe from COVID 19 but also in continuing to provide safe, quality health care and essential services to our community. Thank you too, to each and every one of you in the community for your patience and assistance in this difficult time.

In some ways, the next phase we are entering will be more difficult than the first. As restrictions are lifted, we are **relying fully on compliance** with these measures by all. It is not only about the rules, or what one is allowed to do. It is also about **common sense and concern** for others. I see this community as being close and very caring and this is the time to demonstrate those qualities.

Australia and indeed Norfolk Island has managed to contain the spread of COVID 19. The next step is a **very cautious** zig-zag approach. Small steps forward while monitoring the effect. Making changes too quickly and letting our guard down could result in a spike of the disease (as we have seen in Tasmania). I appeal to you all to **be patient**. We are receiving the best health advice in Australia to assist our approach. It is important that everyone remains vigilant in practising social distancing measures to protect vulnerable people and to continue to 'flatten the curve. In the community much of the "normal" day to day life is possible. As much as we would like tourists to return now, **it is too soon**.

Continue the approach of:

- Social distancing
- Basic hygiene- wash hands or use sanitiser, cough or sneeze away from others, wear a mask and stay indoors in isolation if you are unwell

Influenza and Pneumococcus vaccines:

With the onset of winter we will see an increase in other respiratory viruses. The interest and uptake of Influenza immunisation has been very encouraging and we will continue to provide safe clinics to deliver this service to as many people as possible over the next couple of weeks. Funded influenza vaccines are for children 6 months to 5 years, people over 65, medically at risk patients and healthcare workers. Some patients at high risk are also funded for the Pneumococcus vaccine.

Increased screening at health facilities:

Due to reports of staff being involved in cases of COVID 19 in Australia, NIHRACS (on a directive from South East Sydney Local Health District) will be screening all staff, visitors and patients to our facility. The measure has been put in place to identify who may require isolation or further testing and in so doing, keep the broader community safe. Call ahead before coming to the GP clinic or hospital. If you require urgent care call an ambulance on 000. Thanks again for your patience and cooperation.

Testing:

There has been much discussion over the past week with regards to the relevance and use of tests for COVID 19. I reiterate that testing is only one of the building blocks we use in medicine and is not the whole picture. Swabs and serology (blood tests) still have a high rate of false negative and error. We therefore sometimes use more than one test method as well as contact tracing should we suspect a case of COVID 19. I reassure you that we have the full support of the Public Health Unit in Sydney. We are not hiding any information from the public and there is only one aim: assuring patient confidentiality while maintaining public safety.

At this time we will increase our use of swab testing in the community with occasional blood tests under specific conditions. There has been much discussion about so called Point of Care or Rapid Testing antibody kits. There are many of these tests that appeared on the market over the past 4 months. As most of them remain unvalidated by strict and rigorous evaluation processes used in pathology services, we will not be using them at this time. We are trying to source the ability to do swab testing on island which will be of great clinical significance as we now still need to rely on available flights to get our tests to the Australian mainland.

Media:

This information will be published on the NIHRACS website as well as on the Norfolk Island Health and Wellbeing Facebook page next week. I will continue to provide regular updates and remind everyone to go to the [NSW Health website](#), the [NSW Government's site](#), and the [Commonwealth's Department of Health site](#) for the latest information.

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NIHRACS