

NIHRACS Message from the Medical Superintendent

30 April 2020

We are entering a new phase in the management of COVID-19 and in many ways this is more difficult than the first phase. We can see the difference isolation and social distancing makes to the number of cases of COVID in Australia. This could create a feeling of complacency. The virus is an unseen enemy and in our personal lives we do not even see the effects of it. Watching TV does bring some reality to our lounge room but it is still far removed from us. This feeling of apparent "safety" makes us want to steam ahead and get some normality back to our lives.

Norfolk Island indeed the whole of the world wants to see coronavirus restrictions dropped but if they want them gone forever permanent changes will need to be made to their everyday lives.

In Australia the Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy told reporters yesterday that the way Australians physically interact would be very different in the future - perhaps even permanently. "Even if we relieve restrictions in the future, people need to change the way they interact permanently," he said.

"And in the sensible way, like keeping distance from each other, hand hygiene, probably not permanently not shaking hands, but for the foreseeable future."

With this sobering thought in mind we should plan the future - at least the next year on Norfolk Island with care. We would indeed be happy to have no COVID on the island and be able to invite visitors back as soon as practically possible.

To have better information about our risks on Norfolk we will be advising more testing for COVID. Anyone with the following will be tested:

- Unexplained fever(more than 37.7°C) history of fever OR acute respiratory symptoms

I have been made aware that people may not wish to be tested as this means they will be isolated until their test returns negative. This is a shared responsibility to keep each other safe and virus-free and I personally would be most disappointed if that is a view held in this caring community

This week there will be council rangers assisting with education and monitoring of the community. The aim of this is not to turn Norfolk into a "police state" but to assist with compliance on social distancing within situations in day to day life. This will enable the community to move slowly forward and reduce restrictions while monitoring the effect. I understand the wish to return to the "normal" we had prior to COVID but this will not be possible for many months. A vaccine is currently being tested in Australia but even if it is effective roll out to the public may take many months. The WHO has also cautioned about taking the approach that being infected with the virus means immunity and is therefore affords the person safety This is still very unclear. Provisional information suggests that immunity may occur for up to a month in some individuals but is unknown thereafter. As the virus has only been with us since December any surety of immunity will take time.

Our biggest risk to this community remains the arrival of people to the island. At present there is a monitored mandatory 14 day quarantine and testing of unwell people while in quarantine. This cannot be lifted soon as this is the only defence we currently have against COVID. Short term restrictions will have long term gain. The way to win a marathon is not to sprint through it from the start line to the finish line

I do not mean to be negative but realistic. My suggestion is to enjoy what you are able to do at this time and go about your usual business as much as you can, always bearing in mind that the “new” way of life for the foreseeable future is to have social distancing the norm. We live on an amazing island with lots of caring folk around us - and so far are safe from the spread of the virus.

Have a good and happy weekend!

Dr Michelle Bonnici