

Communication – An Essential Tool in Extraordinary Times

As I write this, the world is suddenly a very different place. From New Zealand's first recorded COVID-19 case on 26 February to the Prime Minister's announcement on 23 March that the country would be going into lockdown, most aspects of life in Aotearoa New Zealand have changed dramatically. The situation continues to evolve by the day, and the ramifications are likely to be felt for many months, if not for years, to come.

Along with the strong messages we are receiving about the importance of washing our hands, we are also coming to grips with new concepts like "self-isolation", "social distancing", "flattening the curve" and, indeed, "lockdown". As from 11.59pm on Wednesday 25 March, Aotearoa New Zealand moved to alert level 4, which means, with the exception of essential service workers, we must stay home in our "bubble" for at least four weeks. For me, lockdown provides some certainty and relief, particularly given the screeds of information and misinformation that was circulating via different mediums in the lead-up to this decision. However, there are many aspects of life that remain uncertain, and there are many questions still to be answered as we watch and wait to see the impact this virus will have – and when some form of normality will return.

At a time like this, for the good of all New Zealanders, clear and effective communication is essential. In terms of our nationwide response, the Prime Minister clearly instructed us to follow the guidelines of the New Zealand Government as we endeavour to contain COVID-19 (New Zealand Government, 2020).

Working together, the Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand (Physiotherapy Board) and Physiotherapy New Zealand (PNZ) have responded quickly and expertly to communicate essential information with our physiotherapy community as it comes to hand (Physiotherapy New Zealand, 2020). Guidance and support have been provided on how physiotherapists can best protect themselves, the kind of services physiotherapists can continue to offer in community and private practice settings, and how to engage in telehealth/ehealth services. Behind the scenes, the Physiotherapy Board and PNZ continue to lobby ACC for telehealth/ehealth services to be extended for physiotherapists. Together, they have supported the move by the Ministry of Health to increase the capacity of the health workforce as part of the COVID-19 response (Ministry of Health, 2020). They have expressed their concern for the welfare of our physiotherapy workforce, and their gratitude to physiotherapists working in essential services at the frontline is clear.

For many of us, our usual methods of interacting with our patients, let alone our families and friends, has changed almost overnight. As a concept, the importance of good communication is not new. In fact, it is a key competency required of New Zealand physiotherapists (Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand, 2018), an essential component of obtaining informed consent, a necessary element of teamwork, and

an attribute that we teach our physiotherapy students. We know that the patient-physiotherapist relationship is complex and dependent on a range of different elements, including interpersonal, clinical, and organisational factors (O'Keefe et al., 2016).

While we are coming to terms with our changed professional and personal situations, we also need to be mindful of establishing and maintaining positive interactions with our patients, as these are linked with positive outcomes, such as reduced pain, decreased disability, and higher treatment satisfaction (O'Keefe et al., 2016). Communication is also a salient component of patient-centred care, which is rated highly in positively influencing patient uptake of recommended health services and self-management strategies (O'Leary et al., 2020).

Given the current exceptional circumstances, now could be a good time to explore and learn creative and different ways to communicate with patients. In the short-term, given our isolation, we are going to be more reliant on telehealth/ehealth, using information and communication technologies to support healthcare practice (Howard & Kaufman 2018; World Health Organisation, n.d.). Telehealth/ehealth has often been used to reach people in remote and/or rural communities, but is increasingly being used in hospital settings to connect hospital clinicians and patients at home (McBeth 2019). It has been proven to be effective, viable, and acceptable for delivering physiotherapy to patients with acute and chronic conditions (Cottrell et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; Peretti et al., 2017., Saywell et al., 2017; van Egmond et al., 2018). In some fields, research has shown that telehealth/ehealth is at least equally effective as in-person appointments, but further robust evidence relating to this mode of service delivery, particularly in relation to its application for physiotherapy, is needed.

In the meantime, I encourage physiotherapists around Aotearoa New Zealand and, indeed, globally, to embrace new ways of communication, including using digital technologies. These may not only provide opportunities in the short-term, but also have a positive impact in the future, bringing benefits to all.

I hope that you will also find time to enjoy reading the papers in the first issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Physiotherapy* for 2020. These include the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of physiotherapists and secondary school students to sports-related concussion; engagement in professional supervision; and a systematic review of Māori pain experiences and assessment tools.

Kia kaha (stay strong)

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