

Wednesday 25 March, 2020

Dear friends,

COVID-19 Information Update

This letter follows my letter of 23 March 2020, which has been widely circulated, and provides additional information about our COVID-19 plans. This update is for the benefit of our workforce, including volunteers and contractors, our residents and their families and representatives, our self-care residents, our company members, and the broader community.

What do we know about Southern Highlands infections, and what happens next?

Harbison does not have any suspect cases currently. I understand there are 7 confirmed cases in our community. To the best of our knowledge all these cases are imported i.e. people who arrived recently by plane or ship.

Soon, we expect our first confirmed cases of community transmission i.e. cases where someone in the community transmits the infection to another person in the community. We expect this to happen within 2-3 weeks, based on the assumption that there are people in our community who don't know they are infected and don't have any symptoms.

Once this happens everything will change, and our health system will come under real pressure.

Social isolation and distancing are critical *right now* to minimise the scale of this next phase.

I am concerned that too many locals are not getting this message, or not taking it seriously.

Harbison is working with authorities, other community organisations, and other aged care services, and monitoring the situation closely as part of our daily risk assessment.

We are preparing to escalate our precautions yet again in response to the first community case(s) or other changing circumstances.

Bowral District Hospital is establishing a Fever Clinic in the outpatient department on Ascot Road, which we understand will operate 7 days from 10am to 5:30pm by appointment.

The role of doctors in aged care must immediately change

Doctors are a well-recognised transmission risk for aged care services, because they go from one facility to another, or because they are exposed to infected people in their practices.

It is no longer a good idea to visit your doctor or have your doctor visit you unless it is necessary.

At Harbison we are working with doctors to minimise their physical visits, and we are working hard to introduce video tele-health options for our residents.

We have ordered additional computer tablets to support this initiative and expect to steadily increase our capacity to facilitate virtual GP visits.

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We already have sophisticated clinical and medication systems that doctors can access remotely, and these will continue to be used to support tele-health consultations.

Residents will not be permitted to leave the home for anything other than essential appointments or treatment that can't be otherwise arranged.

Where it is necessary for a resident to go into the community for an appointment, on return they will be required to self-isolate for 14 days in their room, supported by staff who will implement transmission-based precautions until the risk of COVID-19 has passed.

The role of our hospitals in an outbreak, and the importance of Advance Care Directives

Hospitals are already screening transfers to/from hospital for COVID-19 risk. We understand the Government has cancelled elective surgery at all hospitals to increase capacity to care for COVID-19 cases. We expect Bowral District Hospital will focus on caring for COVID-19 cases, and Southern Highlands Private Hospital will care for other cases.

We must be realistic about the capacity of our hospitals. At the risk of alarming you, we expect that hospitals will have guidelines for prioritising care, and older people will not be the top priority. In part, this is based on evidence emerging from Europe that older people with COVID-19 don't do very well on respirators anyway.

I know it is a confronting issue, but residents should consider their options now, and ensure that they have an Advance Care Directive in place that reflects their wishes.

In my view, there may be great benefit to residents who choose to remain at Harbison under supportive palliative care, instead of transferring to hospital where they may not receive the care they expect, and may be isolated from their loved ones at end-of-life.

Our Deputy Directors of Nursing can provide you with assistance if you would like to make or review an Advance Care Directive.

What will happen if we suspect we have a case of COVID-19?

If we suspect a resident has COVID-19 they will be treated as a confirmed case until test results are received. They will be immediately isolated in their rooms and a dedicated care management team will provide supportive care, using transmission-based precautions (masks, gloves, gowns etc).

A positive test result will be automatically reported to the Public Health Unit, who will direct and govern our response to the outbreak. Unless hospital transfer is required, the confirmed case will be confined to their room for 14 days and cleared if they are symptom free for the last 3 days.

During the outbreak all other residents in the home will be confined to their rooms for 14 days, in accordance with our outbreak management plan.

These protocols are subject to change based on medical advice and government directives.

What are we doing to support residents during this anxious time?

We have cancelled our activities program, in accordance with Government guidelines, however we have reinforced our Wellbeing Team with resources to provide support to residents and help them keep in touch with family, friends, and representatives.

I expect these supports will ramp up over the next several weeks. You may have already received a call from the team as they check in with families to see what they can do to help.

It's important we all focus on what we can control and play our part in minimising the severity of the pandemic in our community.

Our Clinical Psychologist, Jodie Hill, is collating resources designed to support everyone with mental health as we cope with the impact of this emergency. We will be sharing them on our website and Facebook page. Watch this video as a good starting point:

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=BmvNCdpHUYM&feature=youtu.be>

As you know, visitors are currently prohibited from Harbison. However, the Director of Nursing will contact families if a resident is on a palliative end-of-life pathway. Suitable arrangements will be made for immediate family, under strict visiting conditions.

Deliveries can be made to residents by appointment. Please call the office during business hours to make an appointment. Please ensure only one person makes the delivery, that the items fit into one clearly labelled shopping bag, that the items weigh less than 5kg, and don't expect more than one appointment each week.

Influenza vaccinations

Our annual influenza vaccinations have arrived for residents, and we are busy arranging consent forms so we can administer them. The advice this year is to vaccinate immediately. All staff will be vaccinated in April.

In accordance with the recent Biosecurity Act directive, any visitor to an Australian aged care service must have evidence of a vaccination from 1 May 2020. We strongly suggest you arrange your vaccination as soon as possible, especially if you wish to visit a palliative resident.

How to contact us, including our residents

Resident email

If you would like to email residents please send your message to either BurradooResidents@harbisoncare.org.au or MossValeResidents@harbisoncare.org.au, but please don't include any personal or confidential information in emails because they will be accessible by our office staff.

Resident phone

We have recently installed new phone system has the option to create an extension for residents in their rooms, so they can make and receive direct calls. Residents can even keep their old home phone number using this new system.

We can install handsets in the rooms in the Burradoo nursing home, but for the time being in our other homes residents require a mobile phone or computer tablet, onto which we can load an app that connects them to our phone system. For more information or to arrange a connection for a resident please contact the office of our General Manager, Alison Sheer.

Free courtesy phones are available for residents. If you call to speak to a resident our receptionists will take a message and pass it on. Residents will return the call using a courtesy phone as soon as possible.

If you would like to make a video call to a resident, please contact us during office hours to make an appointment for the call. We will include a link to join the call when we email confirmation of the appointment to you.

Harbison phone, email, website, and social media

Please phone us on 02 4868 6200 (Burradoo) or 02 4868 6300 (Moss Vale), or email reception@harbisoncare.org.au, if you have any questions or concerns.

Please be aware that our administrative staff are working from home under difficult circumstances, so please be patient with them.

Follow us on Facebook or visit www.harbison.org.au for further updates.

We know this is a worrying time, but I assure you that we are working well as a team and doing everything we can to keep our residents and workforce healthy and safe. In fact, we are now more than a month into our preparations, and I am very proud of the way everyone at Harbison is responding to this crisis.

I know many of you are frustrated by the escalating restrictions. Please accept my apology and direct your frustration to me, not my staff. Thank you for reading this letter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Cochran', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Cochran
Chief Executive Officer