

Thursday 2 April, 2020

Dear friends,

This letter follows my letter dated 25 March, 2020 and is being circulated to our workforce, including volunteers and contractors, residents and their families and representatives, our self-care residents, our company members, and the general public.

For the benefit of those who have not received my earlier letters, we are providing regular updates to keep you informed of Harbison's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this letter we provide valuable information about the best way to support older people, including our residents, through the pandemic. We also remind you of the importance of an Advance Care Directive that reflects your wishes if you become seriously ill with COVID-19. Please read this information carefully and discuss it with your loved ones.

I am pleased to report that Harbison has no suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases at this time.

What's special about aged care and COVID-19?

Residential aged care services are high-risk settings in the event of an outbreak, due to the advanced age and (usually) chronic underlying health conditions of residents, and the movement of health care personnel, including doctors, between services within a region. In the event of an outbreak, hospitalisation and fatality rates for residents would be expected to be significantly higher than average.

Harbison's proactive response to date

Since February, Harbison has been proactively escalating our normal infection prevention & control protocols. Processes have been put in place to identify and exclude potentially infected visitors and staff and actively monitor for potentially infected residents.

This includes closing to visitors except in the case of end-of-life visits, identifying and prohibiting secondary employment, and minimising attendance by visiting health professionals by rapidly scaling up our IT systems to support tele-health.

We are temporarily employing additional people, including many locals who have been stood down from or lost their jobs, to enhance our ability to manage absenteeism caused by infection. All annual leave has been cancelled, and many of our best staff have volunteered to our COVID-19 strike team, which will operate 24/7 until any outbreak is resolved. Residential aged care services are not hospitals. The work of the strike team will be heroic.

Every Harbison employee who can work from home is working from home, to minimise infection risk and comply with NSW law. Obviously, most of our workforce needs to attend work to perform their duties, and the burden on them is heavy.

We have reviewed and enhanced our outbreak management plans and are ready to deploy rapidly to ensure any infected residents receive the best possible supportive care and minimise the risk of transmission within the facility.

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We appeal to everyone to play their part in slowing the spread of the virus by carefully following their own hygiene routines and observing social isolation and distancing directives. These are the only weapons we have until a treatment or vaccine is available.

New restrictions on movement and public gatherings

People spread the virus. It can't spread without us. We can all make a difference to the numbers that will die from this pandemic.

To enforce guidelines on social distancing the NSW Government has made an order under the Public Health Act. These orders are backed by large fines and jail sentences.

From 31 March 2020 you must not leave your home except to:

1. Shop
2. Work or study (if you cannot do it at home)
3. Exercise, or
4. Receive or provide medical and other care

Also, public gatherings of more than two persons are prohibited, except for:

- members of the same household, or
- essential work or study purposes, or
- a list of other tightly defined circumstances.

Harbison has had non-essential staff working from home for some weeks now. Those staff are adapting well to their new circumstances, despite in many cases being at home with dependants and sharing their workspace with other members of their household.

If you are dealing with our home-based team, please be patient with them. They are learning how to use new, rapidly deployed technology which, for the most part, is working well to create a virtual office.

The rest of our workforce have a heavy burden, being required to travel to and from work and comply with these new restrictions when not working. I am proud of all of them as they go about providing an essential service.

How to support older people through the pandemic

It's very important that we all do what we can to stay mentally healthy through this crisis and recognise that we can play a role in supporting the mental health of those around us.

Anxiety is perfectly normal in uncertain times. It's OK to stop and feel the emotions (frustration, disappointment, fear etc), but then it's important to re-focus and get on with what is within your control.

Anxiety is likely to increase as the number of reported cases increases. Stress can easily turn into anxiety and panic, so we must all learn to manage our stress to prevent that from happening. We ask you to be mindful of these guidelines when you check in with your loved ones to see how they are feeling:

- Limit exposure to media reports, and conversations about COVID-19.
 - It's good to know the facts, but a constant barrage of information only raises anxiety.
 - Reliable sources of information include the Commonwealth Department of Health <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources> and NSW Department of Health <https://preview.nsw.gov.au/covid-19>

- Keep things in perspective.
 - Despite a higher risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19, most older people who become infected will recover.
 - The emergency will not last forever. Qualified professionals are working around the clock to keep people safe and healthy, help them recover when they get sick, discover treatments and vaccines, and mitigate the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. Things will improve.
- Maintaining connection and setting a good example is more important than ever.
 - Keep in touch with residents. Be creative and flexible in finding ways to have virtual social connection, despite the need for physical distancing.
 - Consider sending emails, including drawings or messages from children, to Harbison so we can forward them to residents. 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.
 - Call and make an appointment for a video-visit and we will organise for someone to facilitate having a tablet available for resident use.
 - Consider assisting residents by arranging for a phone to be installed in their room or by providing them with a mobile phone or tablet that we can link to our phone system.
 - Make an appointment to deliver a care package that includes some things residents would enjoy and help pass the time e.g. art supplies, puzzles, crosswords, knitting/sewing, music etc.
 - If you think a resident is struggling contact Harbison and discuss the situation with the Wellbeing Team.
 - Reduce anxiety by talking about something other than coronavirus. Use the time to reminisce about shared memories of happy times, talk about what the children and grandchildren have been doing, etc.
 - Ask people how they are feeling and acknowledge anxiety as a normal emotion. Then draw attention to the things people can control e.g. hand washing, cough/sneeze etiquette, social isolation and distancing. Get your own anxiety under control. Model calmness and don't alarm people by discussing e.g. the latest statistics.
 - Focus on the local situation. What is happening elsewhere is beyond our control and does not directly drive our local risks.

We are focused on being prepared

Our infection prevention and control precautions are designed to reduce the risk of infection, but we cannot eliminate it. We have pivoted our attention from escalating precautions to preparing for a possible outbreak among residents. We are working closely with authorities and other community organisations to ensure we have enough people, equipment and supplies to respond to an outbreak.

Our staff have been undertaking additional education and training, and a strike team is being assembled to ensure we are ready to provide the best supportive care possible to any resident who contracts the virus.

We are working on ensuring everyone is mentally and emotionally prepared for any scenario. Our key message is to focus on what you can control. Everyone has a role to play, and you will be more effective if you don't dwell on the things you can't control and put your effort into what you can.

Vaccination requirements from 1 May 2020

Remember that the Government will require any visitors to be vaccinated against influenza from 1 May 2020. Start preparing for the lifting of visitor restrictions by ensuring you have your annual flu shot as soon as it is available. If you are planning to visit when restrictions ease or anticipate needing an end-of-life visit, please ensure you have proof of vaccination and provide us with a copy prior to the visit. You can email your evidence to reception@harbisoncare.org.au

Reducing routine GP visits and transfers to hospital, and the need to review or put in place an Advance Care Directive

As you know from previous letters, doctors are a high-risk pathway for transmitting COVID-19 to others. Because of this all Southern Highlands aged care services are working with local practices to minimise routine visits by doctors.

Where a doctor consultation must be in-person, the resident will be confined to their room for 14 days. We are investing in a rapid increase to our tele-health capacity to support this change.

The local health district is implementing a non-hospital-transfer strategy to preserve the capacity of our hospitals during the pandemic. Our view is that if a resident is unwell there are benefits in choosing to remain at Harbison if possible, instead of transferring to hospital.

We have been contacting families where an Advance Care Directive is not in place because we need to know your preferences in relation to hospital transfer. We strongly recommend an Advance Care Directive be put in place for every resident.

If your Advance Care Directive records a preference for full active medical management, please consider the likely scenario if you fall seriously ill with COVID-19.

The evidence suggests that older people and people in residential aged care are not only more susceptible to severe COVID-19 lung infections, but they tend to do poorly in hospital on a ventilator.

On a ventilator you will be unconscious and unable to speak, or be visited by family, and likely die alone. If you choose to remain at Harbison you will be able to die in your own bed with friends and family by your side, with the comfort of full palliative care in the privacy of your own room.

If you transfer to hospital for reasons other than COVID-19 you will be entering a high-risk infectious environment. The informal advice we have received from the local hospital is that the isolation possible in our nursing homes is better than the isolation that will be possible at the hospital.

If you have rejected our advice to make an Advance Care Directive, we urge you to reconsider your decision.

Thank you

Thank you for reading this letter and helping us to support our residents through this crisis. Know that everyone in the local health care system is stepping up, aware that this is a once-in-a-lifetime challenge. We are unlikely to face a bigger professional challenge in our working lives.

I apologise for raising delicate and confronting issues, but now is the time for planning and informed decision making.

Please prioritise your own health – including mental health – and be compassionate and patient with people as they adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

If you have any questions or concerns about a resident, please contact the Director of Nursing

Burradoo: Harry Varvaessos +61 2 4868 6200 or harry.varvaessos@harbisoncare.org.au

Moss Vale: Simone Mackenzie +61 2 4868 6300 or simone.mackenzie@harbisoncare.org.au

To make an appointment for a care package delivery or a phone or “video visit” please call during office hours on 02 4868 6200 (Burradoo) or 02 4868 6300 (Moss Vale).

To provide us with feedback please write to reception@harbisoncare.org.au

We are regularly updating information on our website www.harbison.org.au and Facebook page.

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