

Tuesday 12th May, 2020

Dear friends,

This letter follows my letter of 28th April 2020 and is intended to update you on our plans to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the information contained in it has been shared previously, but I want to ensure you always have the most up-to-date information. This letter is being distributed to our workforce, including our volunteers, our residents and their families and representatives, our self-care residents, company members, local general practices, and the wider community.

Industry Code for Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during Covid-19

As you know the Commonwealth Government has announced a 3-step framework to ease COVID-19 restrictions and create a "COVIDSAFE economy", which the States will implement on their own timelines. We support the development of this framework but note that as restrictions ease in the community the risk to vulnerable people will increase and specific restrictions continue apply to residential aged care.

Since my last letter, the Government announced industry consultation on a draft Aged Care Visitor Access Code. We broadly supported the draft code and provided feedback about some details. The final version of the Code was released this morning and is available on our web site. We support the Code and believe our current visitor policy is compliant. We will continue to review our visitor policy with the goal of making it as accessible and compassionate as safely possible.

We also welcome the Government's commitment to fund some of the additional costs aged care providers have incurred to comply with new regulations about access to residential aged care facilities.

Our current COVID-19 visitor procedures

Information about of visitor policy can be found online at <https://harbison.org.au/2020/04/24/harbison-covid-19-visitor-policy-2/>

We are allowing restricted, highly screened visits to residents on a priority basis. Grounds for priority include end-of-life, severe dementia, assessed mental health, birthdays and anniversaries, and residents who relied on highly frequent visitor support immediately prior to 23 March 2020. If a resident does not fit these criteria a request for a face-to-face visit will be declined.

This is because with the current regulations and risk environment each visitor must be screened, some visits require the use of scarce personal protective equipment (PPE), and each visit must be supervised. We do not currently have the resources to do this on a large scale.

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Visits are strictly by appointment. Kylie Brown is acting as our Contact Coordinator. To save time Kylie will pre-screen each request and refer it to the Deputy Director of Nursing for assessment if it meets the criteria. Please do not take out your frustration or disappointment on Kylie if she declines your request.

If the Deputy Director of Nursing approves your request it will be forwarded to the Director of Nursing for final approval. If you would like to discuss whether a resident should be deemed a priority for visits, please contact the Deputy Director of Nursing.

Once a request is approved your appointment will be confirmed by email. Face-to-face visits are currently limited to afternoons, between 2pm and 4pm. (Virtual visits are available from 10am to Midday and require an appointment to ensure we have everything organised at this end.)

You will be required to provide evidence of your current influenza immunisation prior to your first visit. If you choose not to be immunised against influenza you may seek an exemption from the NSW Minister for Health and Medical Research. We cannot issue anyone with an exemption and note that our workforce is also required to meet this requirement.

Each time you visit you will be temperature tested and required to sign a declaration. We reserve the right to refuse entry to any person regardless of whether they have been offered an appointment.

During your visit you must comply with the directions of your supervisor.

You may meet one of our fantastic new temporary care support recruits from Qantas and Virgin, one of our wonderful volunteers, or one of our dedicated carers when you arrive for your visit.

These people have been doing a wonderful job and working hard behind the scenes to maximise the opportunities for visits without compromising safety. They are risking their own safety just by being here. Please show them the respect and appreciation they deserve.

Your feedback is more important than ever

The feedback we have received about restrictions has been generally supportive, reflecting public polling showing that 69% of Australians support visitor restrictions and only 10% oppose them. We thank everyone for their patience as we continue to fine tune our processes. I am sorry for the hurts these restrictions are causing but if something goes wrong, I am determined to be able to answer the question "What did Harbison do?" with a clear conscience.

We will soon be conducting our annual surveys of our workforce, residents, and the families and representatives of residents. We encourage you to complete a survey. The more surveys we receive the more accurate our feedback data will be and the better our planning and your preferences will align. We will provide support to residents who need it to complete a survey.

A thanks to our workforce to mark International Nurses Day 2020

It is 200 years since the birth of Florence Nightingale, who laid the foundations for professional nursing. Harbison promotes professionalism in aged care and is investing heavily in learning and development to that end.

In my view the resilience and dedication of aged care workers is being overlooked or abused in the public debate about COVID-19. A double standard exists with negative, almost punitive attitudes to residential aged care services compared to hospitals and other health care settings, despite the risks of contracting or transmitting COVID-19 for all front-line health care workers regardless of where they work.

This segmentation of aged care from the rest of health care belies the reality. Locally every cog in our health care system has been geared to the comprehensive protection of vulnerable members of our community. Behind the scenes the collective advocacy and leadership of local aged care providers, the local hospitals, community health, and local doctors has resulted in effective outbreak planning.

While we have so far managed to avoid the tragedies seen in other countries, we have recorded cases of COVID-19 in almost 20 residential aged care facilities across Australia and cannot rule out the same disastrous scenarios we've seen in vulnerable populations overseas.

Earlier this year I was inspired by the quiet determination and strength of our workforce. I was surprised to see people turning up for work despite concerns for their own homes and families as the firestorms raged.

In one case a nurse arrived at work with ash on his face, directly from fighting on the fire line all night. Staff arrived at work with their belongings packed in their cars. Some of them could not go home at the end of their shifts, the way blocked since they left only hours ago. Many were evacuated, some more than once. When we were asked to take on the added burden of evacuees from another organisation Harbison's workforce did not blink.

Across the Highlands and surrounding regions dozens of aged care organisations, most of them not-for-profit, reported similar stories across hundreds of homes. Despite the personal threat, our chronically underfunded and over regulated workforce quietly got on with it and maintained high standards of care.

The similarities between the fires and the pandemic are clear. Despite personal concerns – for their safety and in many families their financial future – our people turn up and care for your loved ones.

But there are also differences. Our elected officials took every opportunity to be photographed shoulder-to-shoulder with firefighters but avoid being associated with the frontline fighters at the nursing homes ravaged by the virus.

Scapegoating individuals, distancing yourself from critical systemic problems, and demoralising an essential workforce is not good leadership. Our sector works collaboratively and constructively with the authorities despite recent undeserved criticism. Where is our version of Commissioner Fitzsimmons to rally the public and stand up to any politicisation of front-line carers?

All of which is the long way around to a sincere thanks to our workforce, including our volunteers. I am proud of you and inspired by you. Your quiet resilience and courageous commitment to infection prevention and control and care professionalism is creating a safe-haven for older people in our community. Thank you. Florence would be proud.

At times like this positive attitudes towards health care should include aged care. Positive attitudes reduce demoralisation which plays out as turnover of skilled and experienced staff. Positive attitudes protect residents. Next time you hear someone putting forward a negative opinion of aged care or assigning personal blame for systemic failure, consider stepping up and advocating on behalf of the people who choose to work in aged care. It's a great way to thank them for their work.

Changes at Moss Vale

I regret to announce that Simone Mackenzie, Director of Nursing at Moss Vale, has decided to step down from the role and depart Harbison. Simone joined Harbison in April 2019 and has worked in various roles in her brief stint with us. We wish her well for the future.

Harry Varvaessos has agreed to add the role of Acting Director of Nursing, Moss Vale to his existing role as Director of Nursing at Burradoo. As many of you know, Harry is very experienced with our Moss Vale family, having managed the facility twice previously. We will keep you informed as we search for a permanent replacement for Simone.

We do not expect this change to delay the progress of our refurbishment of Moss Vale. The new kitchen is expected to be delivered in late June after which the new entry and communal areas will be built. I apologise for the inconvenience and disruption but am sure the results will be well worthwhile.

Thank you for reading this letter. Please continue to respect the importance of social distancing, hand washing and cough etiquette as restrictions in the community ease. Each of us will continue to have an important role to play in containing the virus. By exercising our personal responsibility until a vaccine is discovered we are saving lives. Stay safe.

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