

Wednesday 29th July, 2020

Dear friends,

I am sure you share our concern about the COVID-19 outbreaks in Victoria, with more than 700 cases reportedly linked to more than 60 Victorian residential aged care providers.

There have been no major changes at Harbison since my last letter dated 24th July 2020. I am writing simply to reassure you that Harbison is taking strong action to keep our residents safe.

As usual, this letter is being circulated to our workforce, residents and their families and representatives, local general practices, company members, and the wider community.

Harbison remains closed to visitors

As you know, since 15 July 2020 we have been closed to visitors in accordance with directives from NSW Health.

There are some exceptions, which we are managing in consultation with the public health unit. For example, we can permit limited end of life visits.

We will contact you if we would like you to consider an exceptional visit and explain the conditions that apply.

Please feel free to contact your Deputy Director of Nursing if you have any concerns about the health of a resident (please note that we cannot provide information to you unless you have been authorised to receive it), but please don't contact us requesting a visit. Such requests consume valuable resources at this critical time.

I assure you that we are committed to acting out of compassion provided it does not place the safety of our residents at risk. You must trust our multi-disciplinary team of experts to assess when an exceptional visit is warranted.

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NSW case locations continue to increase

You can keep up to date with the growing list of COVID-19 case locations using this link <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/latest-news-and-updates>

We are carefully screening our workforce, including our contractors, volunteers and visiting health professionals, to ensure anybody who is connected to a case location does not enter Harbison.

We strongly recommend you wear a mask if you need to leave your home and proper social distancing will not be possible, and we encourage use of the COVIDSafe app. You should assume that anywhere you go might be on tomorrow's case location list.

Our workforce is carefully screened at the commencement of every shift to check their temperature, current influenza vaccination, and whether they or anyone in their household has been in one of the COVID-19 case locations at a specified time. They know not to come to work if they or anyone in their household have the slightest sign or symptom of COVID-19. They know to avoid mass gatherings.

Our workforce is not eligible for the paid pandemic leave announced by the Fair Work Commission this week. Only ~10% of aged care workers are, and the new pandemic leave does not apply where paid personal "sick" leave is available to employees.

Harbison is providing support to anyone who does not have a leave allowance they can draw from, on a case by case basis. Our industry peak bodies and the relevant unions are lobbying the Commonwealth to do more on this front. Feel free to write to your elected representatives if you think the Government should do more to support workers who are disadvantaged because they cannot work due to COVID-19. Those employees are doing the right, and often difficult, thing.

A feature of the Victorian outbreaks is workplace transmission, exacerbated by the prevalence of workers with more than one job. At Harbison, employees are required to disclose secondary employment. We use this information to risk assess the other job(s), and if the risk is unacceptable, we consult with that worker to find a way to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. In some cases, this requires people to choose between their job at Harbison and their other work.

We recognise and respect that people have a right to hold more than one job, but during a public health emergency that right must be weighed against the risks to safety, and Harbison places workplace and resident safety ahead of the individual right to secondary employment. In Victoria, the Government has taken steps to limit aged care workers to single sites, and we anticipate that these measures will be replicated in NSW.

Life inside the homes

What is going on behind the scenes? Our teams are working hard to maintain as much of a normal routine as possible, but of course there are compromises.

We are surveying residents and representatives for our annual survey. Please take this opportunity to have your say before the surveys close mid-August.

Everyone except our residents are wearing surgical masks while they work, and colour-coded vests to indicate where they work. The masks are in accordance with NSW Health directives, and the vests are part of a strategy to reduce unnecessary movement within the home, in accordance with national guidelines.

We cannot move staff between Burradoo and Moss Vale, so we continue to explore the limits of video technology. Tele-health has been very successful at reducing the need for health professionals like doctors to consult their patients in person. Many of you have used our video system for virtual visits with residents. You can book a time for a virtual visit on our website <https://harbison.org.au/visit-harbison/>

Of course, not all medical appointments can be virtual and essential appointments are being kept. Returning residents are not required to isolate in their rooms unless that is directed by the public health unit or recommended by the discharging medical professional.

From time to time a resident presents with signs or symptoms that might indicate COVID-19. When that happens, we organise a COVID-19 test and escalate precautions in that part of the home to an amber alert.

This is a precaution designed to prepare us for rapid implementation of our outbreak management plan if the test returns a positive result. It should not be cause for concern. It provides staff with the opportunity to conduct a drill, practice their skills, and check that our processes are running properly. I am sorry for the inconvenience that being in amber alert entails, but usually the test results are back within 24 hours allowing us to return to green alert.

The activities program is limited. Social outings are not permitted, other than scenic bus tours. Every activity is risk assessed and modified as required to reduce the risk of transmission or replaced with a different activity if the activity is inherently unsafe. Our physiotherapy team is working hard to adapt the exercise program safely.

Dining rooms have been modified to space out residents in accordance with the health advice. At Moss Vale we are reinstating the old hostel dining rooms because the main dining room is about to be demolished to make way for the next stage of the renovation.

The new Moss Vale kitchen has been commissioned, and we look forward to delivering an unprecedented meal experience for residents when the new dining room is complete in October. I am grateful to everybody for their patience during the building work. I know it makes life difficult for staff and residents, but the result will be worth the inconvenience.

The first household at Harbison Dementia Living in Burradoo is practically full so we will soon start accepting applications for the second household. We continue to welcome new residents to Harbison when places are available.

A revamped kiosk at Burradoo is providing residents with an expanded range of options. A similar shop is planned for Moss Vale when the renovation is complete. We welcome feedback to ensure we are meeting the needs and preferences of our residents as much as possible. Remember that the kiosk, café, and hairdressers are now cashless. Expenses can be charged to a resident's account and settled from comfort funds or added to your monthly bill.

Our care teams are providing regular updates to family members by phone and video. These calls are supplemental to routine contact about care, intended to provide reassurance and an opportunity for families to discuss any concerns they have at this difficult time.

If you are designated as the main contact for a resident and have not received an update within the last month, please feel free to contact your Personal Care Manager to check that we have your current contact details.

Thank you to everyone who continues to send comfort packages to residents. Please see my last letter for instructions to ensure your delivery gets safely to your resident.

What next?

NSW teeters on the brink of a Victorian-style crisis. However, NSW contact tracing seems to be working effectively which means the incidence of community transmission remains low. Aged care providers, especially those like Harbison in South Western Sydney, are benefitting from the opportunity to get ahead of the threat by going to high alert as a precaution. We are well prepared.

Every citizen has a role to play in avoiding unnecessary spread of the virus. There are plenty of morons getting their five minutes of fame with balmy, selfish behaviour. I would prefer the media did not give them a platform. We live in an age where access to unlimited information seems to be making some people more stupid than ever.

I am cautiously optimistic that we are seeing a peak in Victoria, and NSW Health is managing our clusters effectively. The risk should reduce in the next few weeks, provided everyone plays their role.

The recent comments of Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews, about residential aged care were unhelpful and quickly rebutted by Australian Minister for Health, Greg Hunt. The reality is that aged care homes are not designed or funded to provide hospital-grade containment and treatment of contagious diseases. We take our infection prevention & control responsibilities seriously, but we are a home not a hospital. Like anyone else, we depend on the public health system if people are infected.

I am always a little nervous when I start these letters. By the time I get to the end there is a good chance that circumstances have changed yet again. Some days, like today, they are written quickly in snippets between phone calls, meetings, and other urgent matters. Please forgive any typos or poorly phrased sentences.

I hope you find this information useful and are reassured that Harbison is doing everything necessary to keep everyone safe.

I am grateful to our Board of Directors who provide me with invaluable support and have given me the authority to do whatever is necessary. I am grateful to our teams, including our wonderful volunteers, who continue to demonstrate adaptability, resilience, compassion, innovation, and good humour. I am grateful to our residents and families for their patience, understanding, and feedback.

We will come through this together.

Yours sincerely



David Cochran
Chief Executive Officer