



Monday 26th July, 2021

Dear friends,

This letter follows my letter dated 21st July, 2021. As usual we will circulate it widely to ensure as many people as possible in the Harbison community have the same information.

Moss Vale temporary visitor restrictions

Last night we decided to temporarily escalate visitor restrictions at Moss Vale by cancelling non-essential appointments until further notice. I am sorry for the inconvenience. If you have an appointment this week our staff will be in contact to reschedule, probably for later this week.

This decision is response to one of our fully vaccinated employees being linked to a close contact who is a member of her household. In accordance with public health advice our employee will take leave until the close contact completes their self-isolation period and we have escalated infection prevention and control precautions in the home.

We have contacted family members of residents who have recently been cared for by the employee and are contacting GPs of those residents to ensure they are aware of the situation. We will be testing residents and staff to confirm there has been no transmission, and we will reinstate non-essential visits as soon as we have the results of those tests.

I stress that Harbison has not been contacted by the Public Health Unit in relation to this situation and we are not a location of concern. We are simply exercising caution and following our protocols to minimise any risk. I commend our employee for coming forward and identifying themselves as soon as they knew about the close contact in their household. As always, our primary focus is on supporting residents and staff during these difficult episodes.

Southern Highlands COVID-19 status

Although we are just outside the Greater Sydney lockdown areas, we are alert to reports that COVID-19 has been detected in the Bowral and Moss Vale sewerage systems and are monitoring case locations in Mittagong, further south in Marulan and Goulburn, and further north in Bargo. We note a flurry of social media rumours about cases last week and ask that everyone refrain from spreading stories. It is already very difficult to monitor the outbreak without needing to verify every rumour, and even if the story is true, it often violates privacy.

Approximately 12% of Harbison employees live in the Greater Sydney lockdown area. Under the current Public Health Order, they are permitted to work provided they comply with mandatory testing requirements. This is an extra burden on them because they need to organise a COVID-19 test at least every 7 days and be prepared to show evidence of their test to Police if they are questioned on their way to or from work. We also require them to show their test evidence prior to the commencement of every shift.

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Everyone in the Southern Highlands should be exercising maximum caution by minimising movement and interaction and following public health advice. Just because we can, doesn't mean we should. We have been lucky to avoid the harsh lockdown in Greater Sydney but there is a high risk that we will find ourselves in a similar situation if we are complacent.

Our expectation is that the Greater Sydney outbreak will not be resolved before October, so please manage expectations and behaviour accordingly.

Burradoo Norovirus outbreak

As you know, Harbison Burradoo had an outbreak of Norovirus on 10 June 2021 which went on to infect 38 residents and 15 staff before the outbreak was declared over on 30 June 2021. During the outbreak we were closed to non-essential visitors and employed paramedics after hours to ensure unwell residents received the clinical support they needed without transfer to hospital. This initiative was very successful, with only one resident requiring transfer because of Norovirus.

I am very pleased with the way our team resolved the outbreak and thank everyone who worked additional hours. I am sorry to everyone who was infected, and happy to report that everyone had recovered from their mild-to-moderate symptoms within 12-days of the first case.

We worked hard to ensure that families and GPs of unwell residents were kept informed. I note some complaints from other families about communication during the outbreak but have explained that our focus is on the families of unwell residents in these situations, and we do not have the resources to contact every family. The Public Health Unit commended Harbison for an effective response.

Norovirus is the leading cause of gastroenteritis and is prevalent in the community. It poses a significant risk to residential settings like aged care, schools, hospitals etc. We believe this infection was introduced by a visitor and note the estimated cost to manage the outbreak was one hundred thousand dollars. Please ensure you do not visit Harbison or any other residential aged care service if you are even mildly unwell, and please ensure you follow our strict protocols in relation to hand hygiene during your visit.

Mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of residential aged care staff

It is now four weeks since National Cabinet announced that COVID-19 vaccination will become mandatory for all residential aged care workers from 17 September 2021. We have not seen any further detail from the Government about this new requirement, but in a briefing with NSW Health last week we heard that the draft public health order has been sent to Canberra for review. The requirement is national but will be implemented by each state and territory which makes design of the rules more complicated.

I urge anyone who is concerned about the new requirement to wait until the Government provides us with the information we need. I expect there will be a range of exemptions like there are for the mandatory influenza vaccination requirements.

We strongly urge everyone who is eligible to have their vaccination against COVID-19. The information about hospitalised cases from the Greater Sydney outbreak makes it clear that unvaccinated people are at much greater risk than vaccinated people.

Our residents are vulnerable to communicable disease and cannot choose to avoid the risk. For that reason, Harbison requires new employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19 if the vaccine is reasonably available to them. We strongly encourage existing employees to make an informed choice to be vaccinated, and we encourage the Government to consider the issues of informed consent and whether the new rules should be applied more broadly to any workforce who operates in a high-risk workplace instead of narrowly targeting residential aged care.

We are proud of the commitment and leadership our workforce has demonstrated with vaccination rates much higher than average in the sector or community, which is consistent with the high standards we set for infection prevention and control.

Kindness rocks!

Harbison has a strong interest in intergenerational projects that link the youngest and oldest people in our community. A group of residents have enjoyed visiting Oxley College this year, when COVID-19 permits, where they play the role of “grand-friends” to students in the primary school.

Kindergarten, led by the amazing Ms Kelly Lees, have created a kindness rocks project based around these visits which has been documented in a short video that has been shared with the school community.

As the CEO of Harbison and the father of one of the students I am probably biased, but I am blown away by the impact of this work. Kindness rocks! Thank you to faculty and students for their time and commitment to our residents, and for demonstrating the powerful bonds that can unite young and old despite a vast difference in experience. You have made a real difference in our lives at a time when kindness is more important than ever.

Thank you for reading this letter. We expect COVID-19 will require ongoing adjustments to our preparations and precautions, and we thank you in advance for your cooperation and understanding. Like everyone, we are often required to manage the pandemic in ambiguity. By the time we have all the facts it might be too late to act, so we must regularly exercise judgement in the face of uncertainty. Sometimes we will get it wrong but know that we are working hard and acting in good faith with the sole aim of keeping everyone 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