

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

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KEY INSIGHTS

Much has changed in New Zealand since the New Zealand Government imposed a nation-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on 26 March 2020. Research³ undertaken by social researchers from Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research and the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment provides insights into how people navigated their COVID-19 response and what that means for their, and New Zealand's, continued well-being.

Health System

Participants supported the Government's focus of putting New Zealanders' health and well-being at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic response:

We've had an excellent response compared to most other countries, and that has protected our well-being pretty well (MWB71).

However, participants noted that this came at the expense of other health issues:

I think [the Government needs] to keep spending on our health sector and looking after people, especially those that have suffered because COVID meant they didn't get their cancer treatment and that kind of – I think that was appalling. I really do – ...put people's health first, that's what they said. But only when it came to COVID (MWB28).

Delays in treatment, or even the knowledge that such delays could occur if treatment was required, created heightened levels of anxiety and negative impacts on well-being:

So, COVID was pretty scary for me, because I've actually had cancer and wasn't expected to live basically. So, I had pretty aggressive treatment, which has beaten the cancer, so I'm doing really well, but I had some ongoing health issues, so COVID was really scary, because if I get it, I'm not going to survive it...I have well-established relationships with my specialist and my treatment providers so they – I feel like my health and well-being continued quite uninterrupted really. I was quite lucky but...my husband,...[had a motorbike crash at the beginning of the year and quite seriously smashed up his head]...they put his face back together but then lockdown hit so he had no new treatment start. He had – his well-being was put on hold until lockdown finished, so I had the good side, and he had the bad side. It was quite a negative impact...It was really difficult, yeah, because he was quite impacted, his sight

³ A background and methodology report is available from StrongeD@landcareresearch.co.nz

and his brain injury have quite big impacts so not being able to start rehab or get any kind of plan going had a big impact on him (MWB53).

...my partner was recovering from radical cancer treatment and...I did have a sort of ambient worry about what would happen if my partner needed more treatment because it seemed to me that the health system was under quite considerable stress and there were lots of stories in the press about people being unaccompanied going through quite major medical interventions. And so, for my peace of mind and my well-being, that would've been quite difficult to navigate if I hadn't been able to be with my partner when she was going to be in treatment. So, I was worried that more treatment might be needed during the lockdown period, but actually it turned it wasn't, so that's really good (MWB7).

...I went for my regular mammogram in March and found out that I had the cancer again. And I went through – they pushed that through quite quickly to get the operation done, but the delay between the operation and the radiation, which I start next week has been huge. And...I've just picked this up, I haven't been told especially, but that is due to COVID, where people didn't or couldn't come to the hospital to do that and they had to fit everybody in after the lockdown terms changed. And the delay for me has been weeks versus – well, actually it's almost been months, but versus just a few weeks. You're supposed to wait about three weeks anyway, but it's been quite a long time (MWB72).

As outlined in the key insight on building a better society, participants saw New Zealand's post COVID-19 response as an opportunity to address significant issues affecting New Zealand society. The focus of the pandemic response on health and well-being led participants to reflect on the state of the health system. The COVID-19 pandemic and response highlighted to participants the pre-existing inadequacies in, and pressures on, New Zealand's health system. Participants wanted to see health reforms and greater spending on health to address these issues and produce a healthcare system that met the needs of all New Zealanders:

...how is this going to play out with the health system? Because it's not been well funded, and it hasn't been well funded for years. And doctors and nurses are already very stretched...the COVID thing has just really highlighted those really big gaps that were already there (MWB45).

...we've also got indications that we need to be much better prepared for the next pandemic and so that exposes that – the already critical nature of some of the need in the healthcare system becomes even more urgent. It already was struggling and now we want to put on top of it, a whole lot of public health planning burden. Wow! (MWB7).

So, being this hugely privileged human that I am, I've realised so much more about the degree that that privilege has, and the health access that I've got.... [T]his has really brought to light to me how we're either all healthy or we're not all healthy [and] the inequality of health spending and the groups that do worse than Pakeha New Zealanders, basically everybody does worse than Pakeha New Zealanders in New Zealand... (MWB47).

Because, I mean, to be a first world country, we have to have a first world health system... (MWB81).