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## Coronavirus: Inside St Margaret's rest home cluster, with NZ's last Covid-19 case

Hannah Martin · 05:00, Jun 15 2020



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

Residents at St Margaret's Hospital and Rest Home were stuck in their rooms, with the virus literally on its doorstep, waiting it out.

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For weeks, New Zealand watched and waited for the last active coronavirus case to recover. Meanwhile, the rest home linked to the final case was getting back to its feet after the deaths of four of its residents. Hannah Martin visited CHT St Margaret's to see how they have fared.

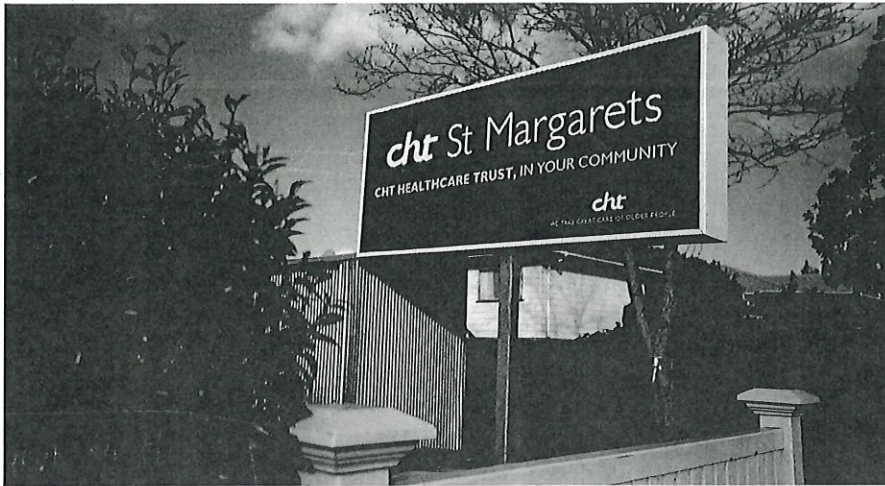
Metres from where staff clad in scrubs sing out bingo numbers, and plastic half-glasses of wine balance on tables, pinned on a noticeboard are well-wishes from Rosewood Rest Home in Christchurch – one of five coronavirus clusters in aged care facilities throughout New Zealand.

Two A4 sheets of paper are filled with handwritten notes from Rosewood staff, surrounded by printed-out emails, scrawled children's drawings, and members of the public sharing their support.

In the corridor, a dozen people melt back into couches, heads nodding as they nap in front of the TV. Life at CHT St Margaret's today is a far cry from where it was just weeks ago: in the heart of a coronavirus cluster.

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ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

CHT St Margaret's Hospital and Rest Home in Te Atatū was one of five aged care clusters of coronavirus.

Last Monday, the last Covid-19 case linked to the 89-bed Te Atatū rest home and hospital was cleared of the illness, effectively making the country coronavirus-free.

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It has been 10 weeks since "that fateful morning" on Saturday, April 4, when CHT St Margaret's unit manager Tina Lock learned a staff member had tested positive for Covid-19.

The worker emailed Lock earlier that week rattling off a list of "textbook" coronavirus symptoms, asking if she should come into work. Lock, "trying to stay calm", advised she needed to be swabbed.



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

CHT St Margaret's Unit Manager Tina Lock was at the rest home every day during its fight against Covid-19.

New Zealand had been in alert level 4 lockdown just shy of a week. It was the same week that saw the highest daily number of new cases on two occasions, marking what we now know was the peak of New Zealand's outbreak.

When the call came the staffer was Covid-19-positive – "one of those 'sinking heart' moments" – St Margaret's bosses braced themselves. As she hadn't been symptomatic while at work, they didn't know whether she'd infected anyone else.

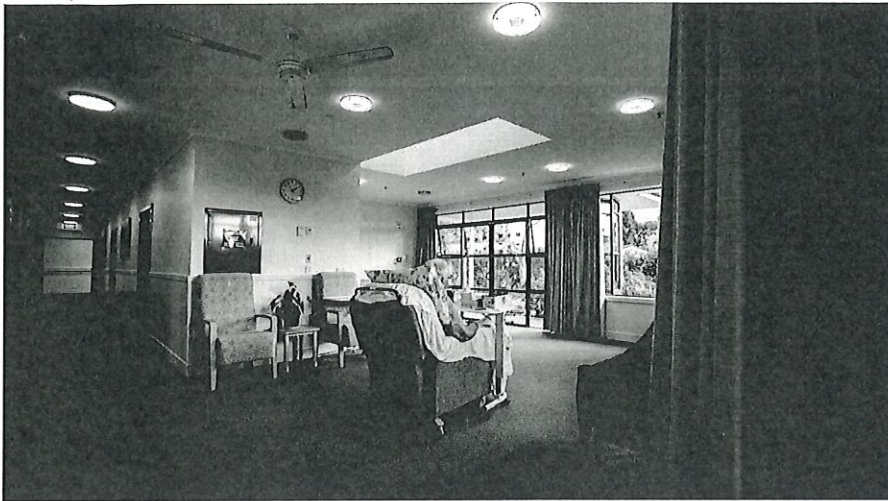
"At that stage we thought that might've been it," CHT Healthcare Trust area manager Stuart Manning says.

The outbreak was slow-moving at first, Manning told *Stuff* over the cacophonous bingo-game happening just next door. Auckland Regional Public Health Service sprung into action, contact tracing those exposed to the woman, and the rest home immediately put close contacts into isolation.

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ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

A St Margaret's resident watches TV in the shared lounge of a unit, designed around suites of 8-10 bedrooms.

Before long, Waitematā DHB made the call to swab all close contacts, identifying the first few residents with Covid-19. It then ordered everyone in the facility be tested, turning up another three cases, all of which "had absolutely no symptoms".

Within nine days, on April 13, the rest home had 15 cases linked to it, and was announced by the Ministry of Health as a new – then anonymous – cluster. The following day, St Margaret's outed itself.

Already, they were "hanging on with our fingernails", Manning says, forced to stand down a significant swathe of staff who were either positive or close contacts.

By the weekend, staffing had been "decimated". Of about 70 staff employed at the home, only four were available to work over that period, CHT chief executive Max Robins says.

There were no registered nurses, no clinical co-ordinator: "that was the point at which we just didn't have the staff to provide the care ... it wasn't possible".



RICKY WILSON/STUFF

Fifteen residents were taken from St Margaret's to Waitākere Hospital by ambulance in mid-April, due to severe staffing shortages at the rest home.

On April 17, a cavalcade of ambulances transferred six Covid-19-positive residents to Waitākere Hospital. A further nine residents – who were well – were also taken into hospital to alleviate pressure on the struggling staff. Minivans of nurses from the DHB began arriving shortly after, as the home had "literally none of our own staff" left.

Over the following week, three residents – all women, two in their 70s and one aged in her 90s – died in hospital from Covid-19.

A fourth resident, Eileen Hunter, was considered to have recovered from Covid-19 when she later died, aged 96. The Ministry of Health ruled coronavirus didn't cause her death, but included her in the ministry's official count.

Back at the home, all residents were put into isolation, unable to leave their rooms or see their



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

To prevent further spread of the illness through the rest home, residents were put in isolation into their rooms, such as the one pictured (currently un-occupied). They were unable to move about, or see their loved ones.

The 'Peachgrove' dementia unit was sealed off from the rest of the facility, with staff and patients making their own 'bubble'. No-one went in or out. Staff took their breaks with residents and "more or less lived" in the unit.

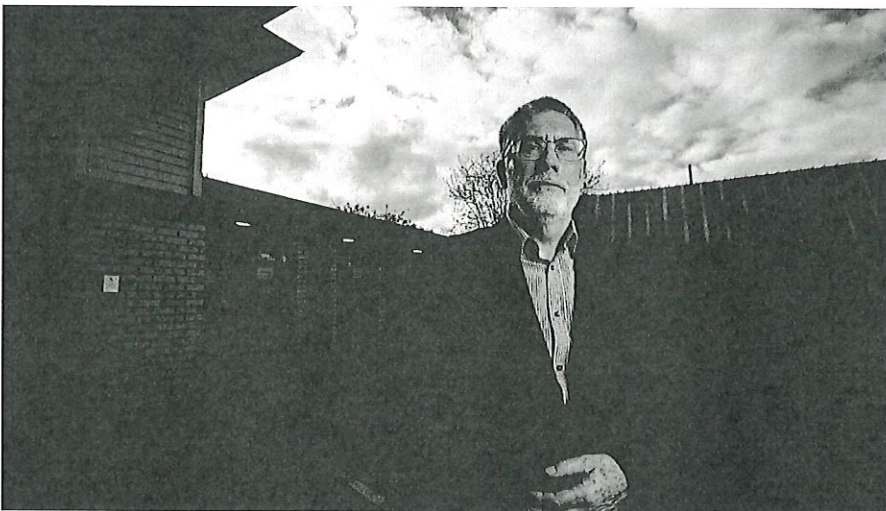
St Margaret's was "unrecognisable", Lock says.

Robins barely got any sleep in the first couple of weeks.

"There was just so much worry about what would happen."

Like many clusters, the source of the outbreak remains unknown, with no conclusive link to overseas exposure.

Of the 51 cases ultimately linked to St Margaret's, only half - 25 - were residents and staff.



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

CHT Healthcare Trust Chief Executive Max Robins says he barely slept in the first couple of weeks when the cluster was picking up speed.

As well as the six residents taken to hospital with Covid-19, another woman tested positive at North Shore Hospital after an earlier negative test.

Seven staff were confirmed as having the illness, while a further 11 were probable cases.

The cluster – the fifth largest in the country – also included seven Waitākere Hospital nurses who treated St Margaret's residents, prompting a review which found PPE issues at the hospital contributed to transmission.

Lock recalls the "terrible conflict" for staff she was having to stand down.

"They would cry and cry because they were leaving their residents, and didn't want to."

While many feared for their own families – some having to sleep in hotels and facing harsh backlash from landlords – they "really worried" about those they were leaving behind, rushing





STUFF

At least seven Waitakere Hospital nurses contracted Covid-19 while treating those from St Margaret's.

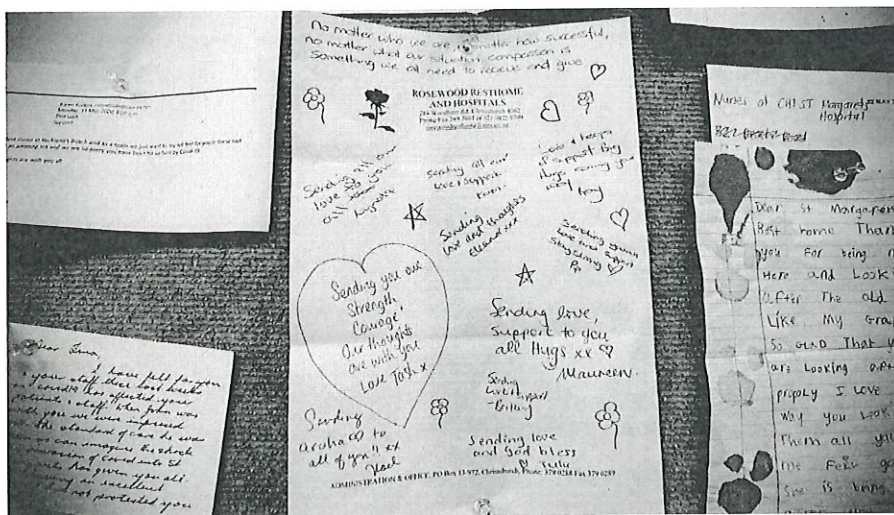
As well as dealing with cases and a bitter staff shortage, Robins and the team had to rally to keep families informed. Having so few staff made this "sub-optimal", he says.

Phone calls from concerned family members were coming in thick and fast, and were patched through to someone working from home.

CHT has 15 other units across the North Island, and had staff in the Bay of Plenty ringing families while others volunteered to work at the facility.

"Families felt so powerless, [and] it wasn't possible to communicate at the level we wanted to ... it was really, really difficult," Robins says.

The days were long and frenetic. The situation was constantly changing, with new cases and new questions, Robins says.



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

St Margaret's staffers say the West Auckland community rallied together to support the rest home.

By mid-May, the residents transferred to hospital were back at the home, with the final few staff members stood down returning just last week.

But only as recently as last week, when the final case recovered, have staff felt they could stop holding their breath during the 1pm daily news conferences.

Though part of the cluster, the country's final active case was not from the rest home.

Since March, Lock has been conducting twice-daily staff meetings to keep the team on top of everything. On Wednesday, just hours before *Stuff* arrived, they had their last one.

There is little in the warm, airy facility that gives it away as the epicentre of a cluster. Residents move about the corridors freely again, some gathering in the lounges off each unit to watch afternoon game shows on TV, while Lock's golden retriever bounds up to those shuffling past.



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

Life at St Margaret's is slowly starting to resemble what it did pre-Covid-19, but the anxiety and loss still loom large.

But a quiet tension hangs heavy in the air when Robins is asked whether he or his team have been able to breathe a sigh of relief, coming through what they have.

"It's a slow burn really."

"[We're] gradually coming out and feeling more comfortable, but it was enormously stressful for everyone."

Staff were so exhausted at times they "could hardly stand up", so there would likely be a "significant aftermath of recovery time" needed.

Lock noted they also endured an "incredible feeling of sadness" about losing residents to Covid-19, and the lack of closure.



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

Thirty-nine aged care residents across New Zealand contracted Covid-19, including seven at St Margaret's. Sixteen died.

Staff work closely with residents and have their own rituals to say goodbye: "they weren't able to do that".

Sharon Illingworth, whose 80-year-old mum Julie has been a resident at St Margaret's coming up five years, says one of the hardest things for those in lockdown at the facility was not knowing how their friends just a few rooms down were doing.

Inside her room, Julie – "the world's best Googler" – kept up with the latest news and headlines about Covid-19, but struggled being in the dark about how residents and staff were faring, her daughter says.

Julie has cerebellar ataxia, which limits her mobility. She uses a motorised wheelchair, and has "her own language" which her regular "fabulous" caregivers have learned. This made it especially hard being away from those staff she was close to, Illingworth says.

"She was really upset when they weren't there – it's her family".



ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

Residents in lockdown were unable to have visitors until the alert levels had changed.

Illingworth typically speaks to her mum every day and would visit her once or twice a week before lockdown. Not being able to see her was "horrible", she says.

It was "daunting" and difficult knowing they couldn't do anything while the home was battling the outbreak. The new staff didn't know the residents and were under the pump, but "you just had to trust she was in the right place".

Illingworth was back at the home to see her mum as soon as she was able.

While it had "lost its spark a little bit" she believed that would come back over time, once staff and residents were able to heal.

Last week she watched her mum have lunch with the ladies from her unit while her 3-year-old great-grandson "ate half of everyone's food" – it "looked normal to me again", she says.

ABIGAIL DOUGHERTY/STUFF

CHT St Margaret's rest home and hospital was 'unrecognisable' during its battle as a Covid-19 cluster.

"It's been hard for everyone, but... we just have to move forward."

An independent review of the five aged care clusters, released on Thursday, found while facilities were prepared in terms of policy and procedures, "few fully comprehended the impact a probable case would have on their facility, or the impact of one member of staff becoming symptomatic with Covid-19 (and test positive)".

"While all anticipated the impact of a pandemic in general, no facilities were prepared for the impact of a positive case, let alone an outbreak/cluster," it stated.

Of 36,000 residents in 650-plus aged care facilities in New Zealand, 39 were affected by Covid-19 and sixteen died.

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(153 cases), with healthcare workers making up the majority of cases.

Now, St Margaret's is starting to look forward, Lock says, starting first with "needing to have some fun".

The team's beloved shared lunches will start back from next week, and the orders for fresh fruit boxes will resume for morning smoothie-making.

Things are different, but it feels like the residents' home again now, she says.

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