

'24 hours shifts' - Aged Care sector staff shortages at crisis point

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The Aged Care Association says staff shortages in the sector have reached crisis point, with some workers doing shifts of up to 24 hours straight.



Photo: 123RF

Adding to their woes, they're dealing with pressure brought by outbreaks of Covid and winter bugs, which are forcing some facilities into lockdown.

When Covid found its way into New Plymouth's Coronation Lodge Rest Home three weeks ago, 19 of its 22 residents tested positive for the virus.

Facility manager Aman Sodhi said it was a tough time for everyone. But, thanks to the vaccine and the diligent efforts of staff, all have since recovered.

"Most of our residents had only flu-like symptoms, so they [just] stayed in their rooms," he said.

"They went out for walk and stuff by themselves, but not mingling with others. But we got through it pretty pretty good."

Many of the country's care homes are battling outbreaks of Omicron.

According to Health New Zealand, 672 aged care residents had Covid-19 as of Monday.

A total of 726 people have died in aged care facilities since the start of the pandemic.

Aged Care Association chief executive Simon Wallace said that as facilities tried to shore-up their Covid defences, the sector faced chronic staff shortages.

"We are short more than 1200 registered nurses so, you know, that's nearly 25 percent of our workforce," he said.

"We should have 5000 nurses in aged care when we're fully staffed and that has meant that we have had to close across the country more than 900 beds.

"So, like in many other parts of the health sector, we are experiencing chronic staff shortages and we don't use the word crisis lightly [but] it is absolutely a crisis. We have a crisis in the aged care sector."

Primarily, this was because nurses were going to work in public hospitals where they could earn up to \$33,000 more, Wallace said. That's in addition to a general shortage of health workers and the impact of winter illnesses on staff numbers.

On the ground, this meant care workers were putting in huge shifts to ensure residents got the care they needed.

"It's not uncommon for us in the association to hear of our nurses working two sometimes three shifts in a row. You know, some of them may be working 24 hours straight. That is not a sustainable situation."

Aman Sodhi said while his small care home had coped so far, it hadn't been easy.

"It has been hard to recruit new staff for a while. We are fortunate that we've got some staff who are really good and they love their job, they have a passion for it and we're grateful that every time we get into a situation where we get short staffed they pick up extra shifts.

"It has been really hard on the staff as well because the recent changes from Ministry of Health, if you've got a household family member who's got Covid you don't have to isolate anymore. So that's where we're seeing staff members where they have to use their sick leave ... because they won't be eligible for the Covid support [payment]."

Aged Care Commissioner Carolyn Cooper said care homes were doing their best, but the staff shortage meant they were doing it very tough at the moment.

"It's a really difficult balance for providers to make decisions to actually lock-down facilities. They know the value of interaction with family and friends and whānau for older people and the older people are really reliant and and appreciate the visits that they receive as well, but it's got to be balanced with safety for the old and vulnerable population."

- [Retirement and aged care sector struggles to meet demand - report \(/news/business/471285/retirement-and-aged-care-sector-struggles-to-meet-demand-report\)](#)
- [Dargaville Hospital closes ward as Covid-19 among patients increases \(/news/national/471238/dargaville-hospital-closes-ward-as-covid-19-among-patients-increases\)](#)
- [Aged care sector: Provider pleads for change to immigration setting for nurses \(/news/national/470772/aged-care-sector-provider-pleads-for-change-to-immigration-setting-for-nurses\)](#)