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A cyclone and its aftermath: How primary care faced the challenges of Cyclone Gabrielle



Patrice Dougan

pdougan@nzdoctor.co.nz

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Cyclone Gabrielle caused extreme damage to transport routes, affecting movement of medical supplies and staff
[Image: NZDF]

In what has been dubbed the worst storm in a century, Cyclone Gabrielle pummelled the country last month. **Patrice Dougan** looks back at how primary care coped with a national emergency amid power and communication blackouts.

This article was written before the Government published eligibility criteria for its **financial support of cyclone-affected businesses**

It is Saturday 11 February, and red and orange weather warnings are issued for large swathes of the North Island, urging people to prepare their homes and businesses for impact, including several days without power or water.

As the winds pick up and the rain sets in, general practices are among those preparing for the worst – but the worst proves to be beyond what anyone was ready for.

Ahead of the storm, some practices and clinics have closed, switching to telehealth or rescheduling appointments to keep patients and staff safe in the forecasted severe weather.

Back-up generators, emergency medical supplies, satellite phones and birthing kits are at the ready. St John and Wellington Free Ambulance deploy staff to regions expected to be badly hit; pregnant women and anyone deemed high risk are offered the chance to leave the Coromandel and be accommodated closer to Hamilton to ensure quick access to a hospital in the event of more slips and road closures after earlier weather severe events.

Cancellations begin

On Monday 13 February, Te Whatu Ora Te Matau a Māui Hawke's Bay posted weather updates and storm preparedness advice. The agency warned of outpatient and cervical screening appointments being cancelled for the following day, but said radiology and theatre were still scheduled.

In Tairāwhiti, where a state of emergency was declared at 9.45am on the Monday, Te Whatu Ora advised some GP clinics were closing early or switching to virtual appointments; some in-person appointments were rescheduled at Gisborne Hospital. Ngati Porou Hauora closed its doors on both Monday and Tuesday, keeping only Te Puia Hospital open for emergencies.

In the Coromandel, Thames Hospital switched to prioritising acute and urgent care.

'It was clear this was bad'

The mind-boggling extent of damage began to be revealed that Tuesday. Even with communications and power outages across large swathes of the country limiting the amount of contact, it was clear that this was bad.

Gisborne Airport recorded 185.3mm of rain until power and communications ceased at 2am Tuesday; other parts of Tairāwhiti measured more than 400mm of rain. Napier had its second-wettest day since records began in 1950. And waves of almost 11m were recorded in the Bay of Islands. Wind gusts of over 130km/h were recorded in Northland and Auckland.

A firefighter was trapped inside a house hit by a landslide, another was critical in hospital – they would both later die of their injuries.

Multiple rivers burst their banks, flooding homes and businesses across Hawke's Bay and Tairāwhiti Gisborne.

In Wairoa, 10 to 15 per cent of the town – home to half its population – was estimated to be under water after the Wairoa River burst its banks. Concerns were high for the settlement, which was largely uncontactable for the rest of the week.

Several bridges were washed away, with access between Hastings and Napier cut off, leaving Napier residents without access to their nearest hospital.

Similarly, Gisborne Tairāwhiti had power and communication blackouts. Large parts of Napier were inundated by floodwaters, the Esk Valley in particular was trashed by the wall of floodwater, silt and trees that smashed into people's homes. A quarter of a million people across the country were without power. A national state of emergency was declared, for only the third time in the country's history.

As the week went on, photographs and stories emerged: people desperately fleeing rapidly rising floodwater by scrambling onto their roofs or knocking through to the roof space of their homes, families who spent hours clinging to branches and hopeless attempts to save livestock and pets. As the cyclone passed and floodwaters began to recede, photos showed silt reaching almost as high as ceilings; cars thrown through windows; and roads, orchards and vineyards washed away – scenes of almost apocalyptic destruction.

And the death toll began to rise. At the time of print, the toll stood at 11, including a two-year-old girl, and 23 remained missing, down from the thousands who were registered initially. Authorities were expecting the death toll to rise.

Health sector does its utmost

The health sector scrambled to help. Back-up generators ensured hospitals remained open, but with many practices and their staff also affected by the flooding and power outages (exact figures are hard to come by), it wasn't always clear where people could access care. In spite of that, practices began opening – either with limited services or reduced hours, or through telehealth and virtual consults if possible.

Hastings was mostly up and running, but Napier – which had around 32,000 homes without power – was a different story. In Napier, practices with generators opened their rooms to GPs from practices without power, with The Doctors Napier acting as a hub base for multiple other practices.

The Doctors Greenmeadows was also supplying a generator for the neighbouring homeless shelter to provide lights and cooking facilities.

An urgent-care clinic was turned into something of a temporary ED, with every available doctor in Napier signed up to the 24/7 roster to ensure access to medical care.

The “collegiality between practices has been great”, Mark Peterson, a specialist GP at Taradale Medical Centre in Napier told *New Zealand Doctor Rata Aotearoa* on Friday 17 February.

Some practices could not be contacted for most of the week.

Pinnacle Midlands Health Network medical director Jo Scott-Jones and his team were becoming increasingly worried as the week wore on without contact with Tairāwhiti clinics, but by Friday, messages were beginning to arrive that everyone was safe, and practices were open.

People seemed aware their scheduled appointments would be cancelled, and so general practice was not busy. But pharmacies were swamped with people who had fled their homes without time to grab vital medicines.

By Friday, GPs, urgent-care clinics, hospitals and pharmacies were open in both Tairāwhiti and Hawke’s Bay. All scheduled GP appointments had been cancelled, and GPs were working on a walk-in/urgency-based system.

Te Whatu Ora also extended its summer telehealth initiative to include all general practices affected by the cyclone. “This means that general practices can direct their patients to Whakarongorau where a GP is available 24/7 to provide clinical telehealth,” the Hauora Taiwhenua Rural Health Network said in a newsletter.

The New Zealand Defence Force brought much-needed food and clean water, vital medical supplies and generators to the region, as well as joining the rescue efforts. Meanwhile, the Red Cross and the Pasifika Medical Association were among those bringing volunteers and medical professionals to help on the ground.

Under the state of emergency, primary care was being delivered free to all patients, Dr Peterson told *New Zealand Doctor*. Te Whatu Ora confirmed that in the Hawke’s Bay it was funding free general practice and urgent care visits until 19 March. Prescription charges at pharmacies in Northland, Tairāwhiti, Hawke’s Bay and Tararua had been removed and Te Whatu Ora was also covering the cost of prescriptions elsewhere in New Zealand for those displaced and unable to return to Northland, Tairāwhiti, Hawke’s Bay and Tararua.

Lessons to learn

As the week wore on, concerns were raised around the inclusion of primary care in disaster planning. In the Coromandel, where thousands were also without power and many roads impassable, contingencies had been put in place to ensure primary care continued as part of a “robust” emergency response plan.

This was not the case in hardhit Tairāwhiti.

“There’s definitely going to be lessons to learn from this around communication and who’s got access to satellite phones in the area; how is primary care linked into the urgent care and the hospital in an event like this,” Dr Scott Jones told *New Zealand Doctor*.

He was “really impressed” with the planning in the Coromandel, he says: “So how do we take those lessons and apply them to Tairāwhiti?”

Dr Scott-Jones says: “I think the role of primary care has been neglected in general around emergency planning and I think that didn’t happen this time around in the Coromandel Peninsula, and I think that’s something we need to have national conversations around.

“We need to be thinking about the role of primary care in a civil defence emergency.”

By Tuesday, 21 February – a full week on from the worst storm in a century – almost all practices and hospitals were back to business as usual.

However, Te Puia Springs Hospital, which had been completely cut off by cyclone damage, still had no outside power and was operating on two generators, including one which had been flown in by helicopter.

Nurses at the hospital were taking a hair-raising farm-buggy ride over rugged terrain to get to their shifts, thanks to a local farmer Colin Skudder, who cut a track across his farm to ferry hospital staff from Tokomaru Bay to the hospital.

And in the Coromandel, boaties were reported as being roped in to deliver scripts along the coast, past slips and road blockages.

Hauora Taiwhenua Rural Health Network asked Te Whatu Ora if it could use its unspent pandemic locum funding to send medical staff to hard-hit areas, like Wairoa and Te Puia Springs.

RNZCGP president Samantha Murton was keen for any locum or support scheme to be used for practices dealing with the fallout from the cyclone, particularly for the post-emergency phase. Dr Murton also says the college is receiving a constant trickle of offers of support from GPs keen to help.

One week on, the colossal cleanup task was well under way, prime minister Chris Hipkins had announced an initial \$300 million spending package, and assurances were being made about “building back better”.

Primary care around the country will be bracing itself for the mental health aftermath, as traumatised populations face the mammoth task of recovery and rebuilding.

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