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## **'A long way to go' for Tairāwhiti's Māori residents hit by floods**



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Gisborne pharmacist Kevin Pewhairangi says Māori have been hit hard by Cyclone Gabrielle because so many live in rural areas that are isolated

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More heavy rain in Tairāwhiti Gisborne added to the region's clean-up woes after Cyclone Gabrielle problems for the region's Māori residents disproportionately affected by Cyclone Gabrielle.

Rain fell on sodden ground this morning, adding to flooding around town, says Horouta Pharmacy owner Kevin Pewhairangi (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Whakaaue, Ngāti Ira).

## **Māori in rural areas badly hit**

Mr Pewhairangi, vice president of the Ngā Kaitiaki o te Puna Rongoā o Aotearoa (Māori Pharmacists Association) and a member of the Pharmaceutical Society executive, says Māori have been badly affected because many live up the coast or in rural areas. They are isolated because of road closures. Te Karaka and Pātūtahi are especially hard hit.

There has been “an awesome turnout” of people to help. But, says Mr Pewhairangi, “There’s a long way to go yet, with the large amount of damage and silt and you can’t do much when there’s still water around.”

## **Strain and panic**

Customers are under mental strain, and most have been affected in some way. “Many have lost houses and are living out of bags, if they are lucky,” he says.

Many people dropped into the pharmacy to get advice after the cyclone: “There was a bit of panic around.”

On the coast, people are isolated and living on rations and dependent on supplies to be dropped off. They have limited fuel as it's being used for diggers to cut a way through. “This one is definitely worse than Cyclone Bola,” says Mr Pewhairangi.

### **Juggling act to transport medicines**

People in cut-off areas couldn't access medicines for a while after Cyclone Gabrielle. Now a helicopter organised by Civil Defence and Te Whatu Ora is taking medicines to Tokomaru Bay.

A round trip by road to Ōpōtiki now takes 12 hours, up from three hours. "The roads are a bit touch and go; each day there is a different surprise because of the extra rain," he says. Two local couriers go there but not every day.

"We figure out who's on, who's going and if they don't go, we are using a helicopter; it's a bit of a juggling act," says Mr Pewhairangi.

## **Own system for scripts**

Horouta Pharmacy has stayed open since the cyclone thanks to a small generator Mr Pewhairangi bought the week before it hit.

The generator powered the medicines fridge and one computer, if they were fortunate. Staff worked in the dark. The landline and wi-fi were down for seven days.

The pharmacy developed its own system so people could get prescriptions because e-prescriptions were not possible without internet. The pharmacists would look up the patients' medicines history on the computer and talk to De Lautour Medical, which is attached to the pharmacy. The pharmacists would then print a prescription, which the doctors would sign. A GP liaison person communicated with the doctors.

Mr Pewhairangi suggested short supplies of medicines, but the doctors were happy for a month's worth because they were expecting an influx of patients. The bridge between Kaiti and central Gisborne was down so they were already taking a lot of unenrolled patients

## **Prepared for next time**

Mr Pewhairangi is relieved to be up and running now with internet and the phone back on. He says everyone scrambled for the satellite internet connection Starlink after the cyclone. The pharmacy got it and set it up but wi-fi came back on soon afterwards. However, the Starlink device will be useful for the next disaster, he says.

The pharmacy and medical centre plan to get a permanent, larger generator and solar panels on the roof.

**Prescriptions are free** at pharmacies in Northland, Tairāwhiti, Hawke's Bay and Tararua. In the rest of the country, there is no prescription charge at pharmacies for people who are displaced and unable to return to those four areas. Te Whatu Ora will cover these costs.

People from Hawke's Bay and Tairāwhiti and Northland who have been displaced because of the cyclone can get **free casual general practice, after hours, urgent care and accident and medical visits** until 19 March at least because Te Whatu Ora is paying. Those services are fully funded for people still in Hawke's Bay.



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