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## Revered manager takes out award: From office junior to operations boss coping with COVID and cyclones



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Wednesday 11 October 2023, 02:58 PM

6 minutes to Read



Top practice manager Lisa Hamblin says loyalty to the team and a desire for her hometown to thrive have kept her in the job [Image: Keepa Digital]

Loyalty and love of her hometown got Lisa Hamblin through a big year bookmarked by COVID, Cyclone Gabrielle and a “gutting” decision to cut back hours. **Fiona Cassie** talked to Ms Hamblin, operations manager of Three Rivers Medical in Gisborne, at the recent PMAANZ conference in Christchurch

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Lisa Hamblin was a teenager when she fell into an office junior job one summer at the Gisborne general practice now known as Three Rivers Medical.

Nearly 29 years later and still there, Ms Hamblin won the 2023 Practice Manager Specialist of the Year Award for her work as operations manager of the practice, which serves more than half of the town's residents.

"I'm loyal and I like to stay where I think there's need," Ms Hamblin says.

The practice has grown from about 6000 to 19,300 patients during her time there.

Three Rivers co-owner, managing director and specialist GP Tom James, in Ms Hamblin's nomination for the Practice Managers and Administrators Association of New Zealand award, writes that she is a revered operations manager embodying humility and placing the team's wellbeing above all else.

Managing the wellbeing of a team of 61 through first Cyclone Hale then the devastating Cyclone Gabrielle, coming in the wake of the pandemic and ongoing funding challenges, was not simple.

Nor is helping ensure the Very Low Cost Access practice keeps delivering services to its patients, just under half of whom are Māori and Pacific peoples, through power failures and staff shortages.

Ms Hamblin acknowledges it was "a big year" for Three Rivers Medical.

Dr James' testimonial mentions her meticulous organisation skills, decisive, fair and consistent team management, and deep-rooted connection to Gisborne. "[A]nd her profound understanding of the complex needs of our vulnerable community make her an embodiment of equity and rapport," he writes.

Her boss' endorsement of her leadership is "a bit over the top," in the view of the modest Ms Hamblin, who was a reluctant nominee.

But, after some tough years, she says winning the award has been nice, and "I think it's a good thing for my team as well".

The award, sponsored by Waitaha Primary Health, came with a beautiful carved taonga, \$1000 in gift cards, an all-expenses-paid trip to next year's PMAANZ conference and "a nice bottle of champers".

## Early career

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And I'm not a quitter when the rest of my team is hanging in there

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Back in 1994, the teenaged Lisa Hamblin had no aspirations for a management career in primary care.

She was looking forward to a leisurely unemployed summer so, when pushed by her parents to look for work, applied for jobs it seemed she would be least likely to get.

But Three Rivers' predecessor, Kaiti Medical Centre, quickly took her on as an office junior. Within six months she was a receptionist and, finding herself enjoying the work and the people, stayed on.

It was the start of an informal, on-the-job apprenticeship by the supportive owners and team that led to her in 2006 becoming an accounts manager and in 2015, "scared half to death", the operations manager of the fast-growing practice.

Of her nearly three decades at the practice, Ms Hamblin says loyalty to the team and a desire for her hometown to thrive have kept her in the job. But she says the past three years – or rather, the past five years – have been "quite challenging".

Her mentor has been general manager Michelle Te Kira, who recently stepped down as PMAANZ chair after a busy time balancing national duties with practice work. "I'm excited about having [Ms Te Kira] around a lot more," says Ms Hamblin.

She admits having "many, many, many times" considered quitting, especially during the pandemic.

"I think what keeps me in it is that I care and I actually can't imagine working in anything else except general practice," she says.

She and the team want to do the "best for our patients that we can in the environment that we are in", she adds. "And I'm not a quitter when the rest of my team is hanging in there."

Cyclone Gabrielle has been testing for the team. Ms Hamblin was lucky not to be affected personally but works closely with people whose homes were hit by the devastating flood waters.

Staff members turned up to work the next day if they could. It was to be day one of nearly a week without phones or internet, caring for patients who arrived looking for care.

Reverting to paper and pens, Three Rivers was “flat stick” providing emergency services without access to patient notes or even being able to phone an ambulance if someone arrived with chest pain. “We would have had to put someone in a car to dash over to St John and ask for an ambulance,” says Ms Hamblin.

The practice’s accountants, BDO, loaned a Starlink phone for a time.

### Cyclone aftermath



Lisa Hamblin won the Practice Managers and Administrators Association of New Zealand’s 2023 Practice Manager Specialist of the Year Award [Image: Keepa Digital]

Seven months on, the Tairāwhiti region, hit by recurrent big storms before and after Gabrielle, is still dealing with the significant ongoing aftermath of damage to infrastructure and community wellbeing.

“Even on a day like today, when it is pelting down, people are traumatised,” she says.

“[The rain] scares people. The kids think ‘oh no, it’s going to flood again’. There are so many layers to the trauma to the people who’ve experienced the worst of it.

“You can feel it, you can feel it in the town, there’s a tiredness and there are people considering moving out of the region,” she says.

The pandemic had uncovered the reality of the sector’s long-standing issues with doctor shortages and funding shortfalls. These, along with secondary services pushing more work on primary care, are “hammering” general practice, says Ms Hamblin.

“Everything is so uncertain at the moment, I don’t think I’ve ever felt so uncertain in health as I do today.

“But everyone in [our] building and everyone in general practice across the country just wants to be able to serve the patients the way they need to be served.... We are all doing the best we can with what we’ve got.”

### **Adapting to survive**

She says she is frustrated at the top decision-makers' "head in the sand" attitude to the sector's funding issues, amid the urgent need to make general practice an attractive specialty again. However, general practice is "never going to look like it did 20 years ago, and people just need to let that go".

"If we don't move with the times, we won't survive. So we need to adapt and find new ways of delivering healthcare."

For Three Rivers Medical, that has meant making some tough calls when faced by staff shortages and burnout, to ensure staff wellbeing and patient safety.

From 1 May, the practice reduced its long-standing extended opening hours of 8am to 8pm (9am to 6pm at the weekends) to 8am to 5pm on weekdays and 9am to 1pm on weekends. Back-up is provided via an after-hours nurse phone triage service and virtual doctor service provider Practice Plus.

"For those of us who have been in it for as long as I have been...that [cut] was gutting but there was no choice," Ms Hamblin says. The extended hours were funded but were provided in response to community need and were no longer sustainable.

Still living in hope – "we have to, really" – of a boost in funding and doctor resources that will allow the return of extended hours, she says this "may not be for some time".

Also started in May is a daytime telehealth hub staffed by two doctors and a nurse in the morning, and switching to two nurses and a doctor in the afternoons, to triage patients seeking same-day acute care.

"I'm very, very proud of that," says Ms Hamblin. "That was a big team effort – everybody got on the waka and it's been amazing." She is also proud of the two nurses from the practice who visit the most vulnerable patients in their homes.

Having heard other practice managers, attending the PMAANZ conference from around the country, affirm how "amazing" Three Rivers is, Ms Hamblin says she can now acknowledge that, while not perfect, it is doing "good stuff".

"We are doing all right, I've discovered," she laughs. "We're nowhere near where we want to be but it could be worse, because there are practices doing it tougher."

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