

Uncertainties dampen growth plans



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When a developer moves on a property you want [Image: Elvir K on Unsplash]

Bethan Rajwer explains what happened to change an Auckland general practice's dreams of expansion

In November 2020, with COVID-19 at the forefront of healthcare and New Zealand's borders closed, the practice I manage was forced to seek out new premises after more than 30 years in the same location.

Two years were left on our final lease and, we thought, that gave us plenty of time.

We started with a needs analysis: what did we need and what would we like? We discussed succession planning and the structure of the practice.

Next, we looked at what we currently had and what opportunities new premises might offer, whether this might be the time to provide more space, or perhaps create a healthcare hub.

We wondered whether to make room for another GP or two. What about nurse practitioners, nurse prescribers, health improvement practitioners, health coaches and healthcare assistants?

It was an exciting time, imagining what we could offer our patients and the wider community with a bit more space.

We decided on our minimum requirements and the search commenced. Nothing, it seems, is easy when it comes to finding the perfect site for a medical practice.

In the past 18 months, we have viewed about 50 properties: new builds, conversions, premises for lease and for sale. We put an offer on purchasing one and were outbid by developers, and commenced lease discussions and had draft plans drawn up to fit out two others, only for them to be leased or sold to another party at the last hour.

Finally, with just four months to go before the lease expired, we signed a lease. We have ended up with a building that fits us just us as we are now.

A major rethink

Why? The past six to 12 months have brought increased uncertainty about what lies ahead for PHOs and primary healthcare. All operational costs – wages, supplies, IT, amenities – have risen. The high levels of concern across the country about the lack of GPs, locums and nurses made us rethink taking on even higher costs with a bigger space.

Although we know about half of Auckland's general practices are not taking on new patients, we are not in a position to guarantee we can find another GP to enable us to keep our books open when we move. And, without more GPs, we can't continue to offer the high level of service we always have.

We could blame COVID-19 for the disruption, and it has certainly been a part of the decision process. But the factors behind our decision were not knowing where primary healthcare fits in the new reforms, how we will be funded, what staff and funding streams would be available to allow us to diversify and pay for more space. These made the risk too high to double, if not treble, our outgoings by taking on more space.

We know primary healthcare will exist in some form in the future but the lack of clear guidance since the health reforms began creates a lot of uncertainty. So, for now, the dream of a big primary healthcare hub will have to wait.

Bethan Rajwer holds the education portfolio on the executive board of the Practice Managers and Administrators Association of New Zealand and is practice manager at Dodson Medical Centre in Auckland

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