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Te Whatu Ora sends email deluge to cyclone-affected practices



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Facing an email deluge is demoralising for Gisborne's Three Rivers Medical staff already stretched by Cyclone Gabrielle, says GP and co-owner Fergus Aitcheson

A Gisborne practice is cancelling routine appointments tomorrow afternoon to process a document dump that jammed its inbox due to a Te Whatu Ora error.

Three Rivers Medical is one of the practices across Tairāwhiti, Bay of Plenty and Lakes districts that were swamped with emailed Te Whatu Ora patient-discharge reports on Tuesday.

The reports date back to December.

In an apology issued yesterday to practices, Te Whatu Ora regional wayfinder Nicola Ehau and regional hospital director Chris Lowry said the problem was due to a human error with its HealthLink electronic referral system.

Just after this article was first published *New Zealand Doctor Rata Aotearoa* received confirmation that Te Whatu Ora will compensate GPs, nurse practitioners and registered nurses for extra hours spent on clinical reviews as a "result of the incident". Michelle Te Kira, general manager of one of the worst affected practices, Three Rivers Medical, expressed her thanks to Pinnacle PHO for truly backing their practices. "We appreciate it." *New Zealand Doctor* later received a formal response from Te Whatu Ora to its queries over the error which can be read at the bottom of this article.

Horrific backlog

Ms Te Kira, speaking to *New Zealand Doctor* prior to the news of the compensation, says

... prior to the news of the compensation, say, her practice and other Tairāwhiti practices still dealing with Cyclone Gabrielle's aftermath had their inboxes jammed with the Te Whatu Ora emails on Tuesday.

In Three Rivers' case, the emails sent to the 19,500-patient practice numbered in the thousands, says Ms Te Kira. Some contain duplicates of patient documents already received but others are new, so all of the emailed discharge and outpatient reports have to be reviewed to ensure patient safety.

"It's a nightmare. We now have this horrific backlog of inbox documents for our clinicians to go through.

"We haven't caught up after the cyclone...of all areas for this human error to happen...people are very, very angry."

She says three Rivers is cancelling and rescheduling GP and nurse practitioner appointments from noon tomorrow to give clinicians time to “go through this absolute mess”.

“We’ll be doing emergency walk-ins only.”

This meant putting off patients who in some cases had been waiting for weeks as the practice was still not back to business as usual after the cyclone. “It’s one day at a time. I even have staff off still, as they lost bloody everything.”

‘Cherry on top’ of tough times

Three Rivers managing partner and specialist GP Fergus Aitcheson says his heart sank when he opened his inbox on Tuesday afternoon to find it swamped.

“If you talk to a GP about what’s killing them at the moment, it’s their inbox,” Dr Aitcheson says.

For GPs already struggling to deal with multiple updates of secondary care patient documents to find themselves dumped with duplicates to review and file is “demoralising” for him and his staff.

“My staff have been busting their collective arses for the last two-and-a-half years fighting the pandemic and then we’ve had to deal with a massive spike in population anxiety and mental health related to the cyclone and its disruption.

“So this is the shit cherry on top of the shit icing on top of the shit cake.”

GPs need to be able to trust systems

Dr Aitcheson says the practice had no choice but to cancel appointments tomorrow afternoon to clear the backlog and there was a “real cost” to having a GP or NP sitting at a desk reviewing dumped documents.

Speaking to *New Zealand Doctor* prior to the compensation news he said was realistic about the chances of Te Whatu Ora compensating for the clinician time but expects a “proper real deal” investigation into the “human error” that caused the problem and how to prevent it happening again.

“We can’t do our job unless we know that the systems that serve the information flow to and from primary, secondary and allied care actually work and can be trusted.

“The GP workforce has a very strong vested interest on behalf of our patients in being able to trust that.”

Disruption regretted

Te Whatu Ora's Ms Ehau and Ms Lowry told practices an urgent investigation was launched "and we confirmed the issue was due to human error".

"The system is now operating as normal," they wrote.

"We regret the significant disruption this will have caused for your practices. Our people are continuing to work with affected parties to identify any additional risk or impacts. We will update you with any further information or actions as a result of this process."

Time-consuming reviews

Pinnacle Midlands Health Network medical director Jo Scott-Jones says Pinnacle practices in Tairāwhiti and Lakes were impacted by the error, which saw a “pretty substantial” number of patient documents dated back to December delivered to their inboxes.

“It’s not clear whether it has affected every practice management system.”

Dr Scott-Jones says reviewing the documents would need to be done by a GP or NP as it was not something “easily delegated” and would take “hours and hours of work”.

Te Whatu Ora media response

Te Whatu Ora, in an email response to New Zealand Doctor received 5.40pm, confirmed that a number of its patient documents were resent to 681 practices, mainly within Lakes, Bay of Plenty and Tairāwhiti areas but also some outside of those regions.

Te Whatu Ora interim director primary community and rural Emma Prestidge says in the email it has apologised to all practices and staff affected by the error in a clinical information management system.

"This was linked to an input error rather than a system issue, and plans are in place to ensure it does not happen again."

She says the majority of affected practices received fewer than 10 documents due to this error but 53 practices were re-sent over 100 documents and one practice received 1400.

Te Whatu Ora confirmed that time taken by general practice staff to undertake clinical review of the documents would be reimbursed. Ms Prestidge says that Te Whatu Ora would also fully fund affected general practices referring their patients to clinical telehealth services or for casual consultation at another provider.

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