

22 April 2020

Dear members of the Bethany Christian Care Family,

## **COVID-19 UPDATE**

You may have seen comments made by the Prime Minister and the Chief Medical Officer yesterday, urging aged care providers to continue to allow visitors to enter residential aged care homes. The Queensland Premier and Chief Health Officer made similar comments today.

At this time, there has not been any new legally binding direction as a result of those comments.

### **Our policy**

At this stage we are not loosening the current restrictions on visitor access to our aged care facilities. We will continue to monitor and review this policy as the COVID-19 situation changes.

### **Acting to protect residents and staff**

I would like to congratulate the Federal and State Governments, Oppositions and Chief Health/Medical Officers for the way that they have managed the response to COVID-19. Clearly, their actions and the cooperation of the Australian community means that we are in an enviable position compared to many other countries. They have had to make difficult decisions about social distancing and shutting down normal activities in order to save lives.

Likewise, aged care providers including Bethany Christian Care, have had to make similar difficult decisions in the best interests of residents and staff.

We have sometimes been one or two steps ahead of the Government and medical experts in restricting visitors, implementing social distancing, and introducing measures such as temperature checking of visitors and staff.

The overwhelming response from our residents, families and staff is that the decisions we have made have been the right ones to protect them or their loved ones. We appreciate your support.

Bethany Christian Care is a not-for-profit organisation. To benefit our residents:

- Donations are tax deductible
- Our investment fund is exempt from the Centrelink/ Veterans' Affairs deeming provisions
- We are thankful for bequests.

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*"Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ." Galatians 6:2*

## **Prevention better than managing an outbreak**

In the Chief Medical Officer's comments, he stated that the *"Government's moves to ramp up its response to outbreaks in aged care facilities should provide confidence that any future outbreak would be managed effectively."*

The actions we have taken to date have been about preventing any COVID-19 outbreak in the first place. We would much rather prevent an outbreak than manage one.

Tragically, we have seen COVID-19 outbreaks in Australian aged care homes amongst residents and staff, where even a single infectious person can have devastating and fatal consequences.

Internationally, we have been advised that in some countries as many as one quarter to one third of all COVID-19 deaths are being attributed to residents in aged care homes (if indeed they are being counted).

If we allow even two visitors per day for each resident that could mean hundreds of additional people coming into our aged care facilities each day. At this time, we assess the risk of so many extra people entering our aged care facilities is still too great.

I note that Queensland Government considers it too great a risk to have more than two visitors in a private home and has made legally binding directions to that effect. We consider the risk of hundreds of visitors entering the home of our frail, elderly residents is even greater. Consistent with the Government's thinking on private home visits, this risk is not one we want to take at this time.

Therefore, as I am sure you would support, we continue to take a conservative and cautious approach to the health and safety of residents and staff.

## **Keeping social interactions happening**

We share the Prime Minister's concerns regarding the health and well-being of residents while there is restriction on visitors. This is why we have introduced measures such as increasing the hours of the Lifestyle Supervisors (to cover 7 days per week), boosting the number of Lifestyle Assistants, as well as introducing virtual visits and other ways that residents and families can keep in touch.

## **Residents not shut in**

I would like to assure you that our residents are not being *"shut off"* or locked *"away in their rooms."* The only residents who are being isolated are those showing flu-like symptoms, or residents who are quarantined because they have entered the aged care facility from either hospital or the community.

## **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

We have been proactive in sourcing PPE with no assistance from either the Federal or State Governments. Media reports and comments by the Chief Medical Officer that the Government is providing PPE to the aged care sector has not been our experience. We have had to scramble and become increasingly creative just to obtain enough PPE for our normal day-to-day operations, as our regular deliveries have been delayed or, in some cases, requisitioned by public hospitals.

Given the PPE shortages that the hospital sector is reporting we cannot count on there being enough PPE available to manage an outbreak of COVID-19 in an aged care facility should we need it. This is why we maintain a cautious approach, and are taking all reasonable measures to avoid an outbreak.

## **When will we change our policy?**

As we have done throughout this crisis, we will continue to carefully consider all the advice given by the Federal and State authorities, as well as from our peak industry bodies and our clinical and executive teams.

Of course, the restrictions of visitors will not remain in place forever. However, before we loosen restrictions, we would like to see that:

- Community infection transmission rates in SE Queensland have been consistently negligible over a meaningful period of time.
- The Government has loosened general community social isolation restrictions.
- PPE and other essential items have become more readily available to the aged care sector.

As you know, the COVID-19 situation is fluid. As such, we continually review and consider these matters.

## **Getting ready for when visits re-commence**

When visiting restrictions are loosened, please be aware that it is a legally binding direction from the Queensland Chief Health Officer that no one may enter an aged care facility after 1 May 2020 unless they have *“an up to date vaccination against influenza, if the vaccination is available to the person”*.

The Chief Health Officer’s direction only gives one example of why a vaccination is not available to a person – that is, *“the vaccination is not available to a person with a medical contraindication to the influenza vaccine”*.

After 1 May 2020, visitors will need to provide proof of vaccination or a doctor’s letter confirming the vaccination is not available to them.

## Conclusion

The welfare, health and safety of our residents and staff is our top priority. Thank you for your understanding and support during this time. We will continue to keep you informed.

I appreciate your continued prayers for all the Bethany Christian Care Family.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Rohan Reid', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rohan Reid  
CEO