

Health Matters - Wellness Out West

WOW

The importance of good access to primary care cannot be overstated. Quick and easy access is a key factor in determining long term outcomes. The sooner the treatment, the better the chances for a full recovery. We all know the old adage 'It's better to be safe than sorry' and you should never delay in going to see your GP in the expectation that you will get better in a few days naturally or you don't want to bother your doctor because what you have is 'only flu' or something else that seems trivial, like a small black spot that is a malignant melanoma, a deadly cancer cured if caught early.

Unfortunately some people in West Auckland have great difficulty accessing a GP locally at all as a number of practices have closed their books to new patients.

For this reason I am departing from my normal column which usually deals with specific clinical health matters. I'm making an exception today because of a rare event in the primary health care sector nowadays. An entirely new practice in Sturges Road, Henderson opened on the 2nd of February this year. The Palomino Medical Centre is the first new practice to open in probably more than a decade in Waitakere City. I've been scratching my head in vain to remember the last one.

Why is the arrival of a new practice such a notable and a rare event? Because these days it is much more likely that practices are closing or amalgamating into bigger medical centres. Moreover, a small practice starting from scratch with an open list being led by two young, energetic health professionals is even more unusual at a time when the trend is towards larger centres.

New Zealand does not have enough doctors, especially GPs. We also have an ageing primary health workforce and when doctors retire or leave the system, they find it difficult and sometimes impossible to get anyone to take over their practices.

The reality is that the demands of a modern health care system, underpinned as it is by a considerable bureaucracy that is tracking health at a population level, have turned general practice from being solely a vocation into the need to be providers of information up the system while meeting an increasing number of regulations. No wonder many clinicians do not wish to take on the responsibility of owning a practice. They want to see their patients and care for them, not be formfillers for governments.

Waitakere has the lowest number of GPs for its population size of more than 200,000 people than any other metropolitan area of New Zealand and only the rural West Coast of the South Island has fewer relative to its population numbers overall. With some of the highest population growth in the country, the pressure on our existing primary care practitioners can only increase.

DRAFT

Otago trained GP Dr Shamnika Rupasinghe and Pharmacist Vishal Raniga are welcome representatives of the next generation of their professions, graduating as they both did in 1998. Their arrival is particularly great for local families with young children, as the practice is based at the Palomino Market next to Western Heights School in an area that is growing rapidly.

Furthermore, the new practice which currently has an open list will help relieve the pressure on those other practices in the Henderson area which have been forced to close their books to new patients.

So congratulations to Palomino Medical Centre on joining us and welcome to West Auckland. And there is plenty of room for more new general practitioners to establish themselves in West Auckland. *HealthWEST* PHO will do all it can to support any GPs who want to do so.