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## **How St John of God Berwick Hospital answered an urgent COVID call to action**

When the Department of Health and Human Services calls with an urgent request to accommodate 30 aged-care residents, some positive for COVID-19, some negative, how did the CEO of St John of God SEM (South East Melbourne) Hospitals respond?

"I told them to give me two hours," said Lisa Norman. "To which I was told - you have 45 minutes Lisa. This is serious and it is not negotiable."

A short time later when physiotherapist, Maddy Williams, saw Lisa Norman in scrubs pushing a trolley down the hall she immediately thought, "Oh something's happening, something's going down – that's not normal."

In the year that has thrown us every curve ball imaginable, something that would have once been a strange sight to see was fast becoming the new norm. A COVID-19 kind of normal.

With many months of scenario testing, planning and preparing behind the St John of God Berwick Hospital (SJGBH) team they were well equipped to take immediate action in securing a unit that would be solely dedicated to the potentially COVID-positive arrivals. Rhonda O'Connor, Director of Mission Integration, explained that this involved staff from all different areas of the hospital coming together to clear the ward, move patients, clean rooms and to welcome and comfort those who had been evacuated from their aged-care homes.

"Everyone just sort of stopped and went, 'Okay, well what do you want me to do?'," admitted Rhonda proudly. "I didn't hear anyone complain," she added in reference to having to wear PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) for hours on end. "You couldn't even take a sip of water. You would have to wait for your break – sometimes that would be five to six hours away."

Enrolled nurse, Michelle Delaney, was one of those caregivers who selflessly volunteered to put herself on the front line to care for COVID-positive residents in need. "It was never a question about me working in a COVID unit, it was just a

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question of the logistics of where I was going to live during this time,” said Michelle given she did not want to risk the safety of her family. She was one of many caregivers to sacrifice time with their own immediate families to come to the aid of those in need. Recognising this inherent risk, St John of God Health Care organised for their caregivers to be relocated to hotel accommodation for the entire time they would be working in the COVID unit.

“I got a call on Wednesday or Thursday afternoon saying they urgently needed caregivers to come across because there weren’t enough hands on deck. By Friday I had my hotel booked and I had fully moved in by Sunday,” explained Renate Deveson, Intake Health Coordinator for St John of God Accord in Greensborough, who, remarkably, would go on to live at that hotel, isolated from family and friends, for the following six weeks.

Of the 30 residents to transfer into SJGBH’s care, 24 were positive for COVID, 22 of them were confused, seven required hoist transfers and many needed complete assistance with meals and toileting. To complicate things further, caring for the individual needs of each resident was very challenging given they arrived with only the clothes on their backs. There was limited information given the rapid evacuation that was required. There was also, surprisingly, no confirmation of who was positive for COVID-19 and who wasn’t.

It was a distressing situation for the patients and their families. Residents were transferred without their gait aids, glasses or medications. However, organisations near and far such as Coles, Berwick Pharmacy, Coca Cola and Mount Franklin Water, Gold 104.3FM, The Skincare Company and Domino’s to name a few also answered the call for help by dropping off toiletries for residents and caregivers. And food and drinks arrived to support the teams caring for patients as many of them lost weight and fluids while wearing PPE. The hospital focused on ensuring that the contact was made daily with worried families and friends to reassure them they were safe and being well cared for.

Despite the challenges and the loss of lives, the St John of God Health Care team came together to overcome what seemed like an insurmountable task to begin with. In doing so, it recognised early in the process that accommodating the aged-care patients within the Berwick hospital on Kangan Drive was only a short term solution and quickly the team turned its focus to recommissioning the former St John of God Berwick Hospital site on Gibb St in order to receive those patients who were no longer testing positive for COVID, but still required care while awaiting their aged-care facility to be ready to receive them back.

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“The Gibb Street location has always been an integral part of Berwick’s community health offerings, said Lisa Norman. “And considering it was there to offer care during the pneumonic influenza epidemic over 100 years ago, it seemed to be the very fabric of this hospital to respond to an urgent community need yet again.” Within a short two-week period the hospital, which had not been used since it closed in early 2018, was repurposed to begin accepting aged-care patients, with the first arriving from the Kangan Drive location on August 17. Remarkably, more than 50 St John of Care Health Care workers from across the state also answered the call for help, leaving their regular places of work and homes to remain at the Gibb Street site until the last of the aged-care patients were discharged on September 24.

“What I look back with is, how proud I am of the team effort,” offered Allison Merrigan, Director of Nursing and Patient Experience, “because not once did I think that we couldn’t do it. When someone’s energies were flagging there was someone else there ready to lift you up and to keep you going. And that’s what I am really proud of at the end of the day.”

**Attached: Karen Ward, Nurse Unit Manager’s personal reflection**

**Video footage of interviews** <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1657363891091902>

## **For More Information**

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