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6am patient call: A morning in the life of a stretched primary care nurse



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This morning's early patient wake-up call is an example of why primary care nurses need more recognition, says NZNO primary care nurse leader Tracey Morgan [Image: Virginia McMillan]

When a bleary-eyed Tracey Morgan reached for her ringing phone at 6.03am this morning she found herself added to a video call between a distressed patient and her anxious mother.

“I’ve got front view of a patient who cannot breathe...She’s crying, she’s hyperventilating and I’m spending all my energy in bed trying to calm this person down...I’m like, this is crazy.”

Ms Morgan, the chair of NZNO’s College of Primary Health Care nurses and a negotiator for the sector’s biggest primary care nurse agreement, says it eventually became clear that the daughter had called an ambulance that dropped her at a 24/7 urgent care centre in Hamilton, after telling her she wasn’t sick enough for the emergency department. The daughter had then called her mother, and the mother then called Ms Morgan as a nurse in the community who knew the daughter’s special needs.

Still in her nightie, Ms Morgan tried to calm the patient and also address the graveyard shift nurses' concerns (as they had now joined the conversation) about the call being recorded. "And in the meantime, the girl was hyperventilating and becoming more hypoxic." The call continued for over an hour and a half, Ms Morgan says, bringing home the reality of what primary care nurses like herself and the urgent care nurses face day-to-day.

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Out of nightie at last

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During the 90-minute call she managed to negotiate time to get out of bed and get ready for work so was in her uniform by the time the urgent care doctor joined the call, who said the young woman's distress was caused by a badly inflamed ear infection.

Ms Morgan says her early wake-up call is an example of why stretched primary care nurses need more recognition and coincided with voting starting today on **a pay offer for the NZNO Primary Health Care MECA**. She and the urgent care nurses at the end of an overnight shift did not want to be facing a distressed patient before dawn.

"As I was driving to work [this morning] I was thinking...This is why our nurses are just so stretched...they've absolutely got no energy."

Such incidents, she says, are what drives her every day to fight for primary care nurses, administrators and allied health for better recognition of what nurses deliver in primary health – "because they care, they absolutely care".

But nurses and administrators need more resources so they can continue to deliver what they want to deliver without being put under undue pressure, she says.

Southern correspondent Fiona Cassie has been a journalist since 1985. Fiona covers the South Island and her areas of interest include nursing, rural health, health reforms, GP business and PHO news.

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