



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 13 March 2021 – “Covid 19 Vaccine Strategy in Good Hands”

The silverish bullet has arrived in the form of the Pfizer vaccine and our frontline border workers have started to be vaccinated. There is a wide range of specific groups putting their hands up and waving to be next in line, the Health Care Practitioners, port workers, South Aucklanders, Aucklanders, Maori and Pacific people and the elderly. Even our NZ cricket team have taken the opportunity to sidle up to Ashley Blomfield when he got a freebee to watch cricket. It's heartening to see such enthusiasm to get the jab as we head down the road to achieve 'herd immunity' which is a rather animalistic term to describe a community which has developed such resilience to a virus that there is nowhere for it to spread.

The NZ Covid Vaccine Strategy is taking into account two different elements as it rolls out the shots. Firstly, cohorts or groups of people who are vulnerable to health complications as a result of getting Covid and, secondly, people who operate or work in settings where they are more likely to come in contact with the virus such as border staff and health workers.

Disabled people are one of the “at risk” people that have been identified in the Vaccine Strategy. This comes as a relief that we have been recognised as a vulnerable subsection of society. Overseas research has found that people with disabilities are more at risk than non-disabled people. In the United Kingdom a public health England study completed last November found that people with learning disabilities were dying at six times the rate of the general population, with those in the 18 to 34 age group 30 times more likely to die with the virus than their counterparts in the wider population. This issue in England came under the spotlight when a well-known DJ, Jo Whiley was offered the vaccine before her sister Frances who has a genetic disorder and lives in residential care. Frances then went on to be tested positive for the virus and admitted to hospital with a severe Covid infection. Luckily Frances is now out of the woods and has been discharged from hospital. It was however a close call, during which they were even discussing palliative care.

In New Zealand our Vaccine Strategy is being informed by several different reference groups, including the Covid 19 Strategy Taskforce, the Covid 19 Immunisation Programme Governance Group, the Covid 19 vaccine and Immunisation Vaccine Steering Group and the Covid 19 Immunisation Implementation Advisory Group. This last group includes Dr Tristram Ingham who is a Disability representative. Dr Ingham who is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Medicine at the University of Otago was responsible for coming up with the ingenious world acclaimed 'bubble' concept. He came up with the 'bubble' concept before the Covid Four Level alert system came into being, as he considered how to isolate vulnerable people from the virus, whilst using positive language. The 'bubble' concept has proven to have all round appeal to people with or without a health background. Dr Ingham has lived experience of disability through having Muscular Dystrophy and being a wheelchair user. He has added exceptional value in our fight against Covid 19. The Vaccine Strategy is in good hands.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.