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| The impact of lockdown on social isolation among older people  Speak Up - Kōrerotia  17 June 2020 | |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s community access radio station Plains FM 96.9 and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  Nau mai ki te hōtaka tika tangata: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, ko Sally Carlton ahau. It’s June 2020 and the world is in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic with over 8 million confirmed cases and 430,000 deaths which is the population of Christchurch - which is actually pretty phenomenal when you think about it like that.  In order to curb the spread of the disease here in Aotearoa, in March the government introduced restrictions to minimise interaction between people; because the virus is transmitted through coughing and sneezing, it can’t be transmitted if people aren’t coming into contact with each other. Within just a few days of announcing the restrictions, we went into lockdown, during which we were supposed to remain in physical contact only with people in our bubble, which for most of us consisted of people in our immediate household.  After four weeks at Alert Level 4, restrictions were slightly eased for the two weeks of Alert Level 3 and that meant that we could expand our bubble slightly. We’ve since moved through Alert Level 2 and now we’re at Alert Level 1 and that means no active COVID-19 cases in New Zealand and no apparent community transmission.  So this great news! Well done New Zealand! But what are the impacts of these weeks of lockdown? Today we’ll be considering the impact of lockdown on older people, particularly in terms of their social isolation. And this is an interesting cohort to consider because older people tend to be among the most socially isolated people in our society anyway and they are also among the demographic which seems to be especially susceptible to contracting COVID-19 and so probably most needed to remain physically separate from others.  Our show today will take the form of four one-on-one interviews with older people in Christchurch who share their experiences of lockdown, combined with some ‘analysis discussion,’ for want of a better term, from people who have worked supporting older people before, during and after the lockdown. We’re going to kick off thinking about social isolation among older people as a general phenomenon with our guests. |
| Simon | My name is Simon Templeton. I’m the Chief Executive at Age Concern Canterbury. So we’re an organisation that works solely supporting the over-65 population. We’ve been an organisation that’s been doing that for the last 68 years so well entrenched in Christchurch and wider Canterbury and what the needs of older people were. And certainly for us, the COVID lockdown was a challenging time and threw up some new issues for the older people that we support and it meant my staff had to work differently. So obviously from home like everybody else but actually the type of support that we were offering needed to be different as well. |
| Sally | And Susi? |
| Susi | Kia ora koutou. Ko Susi ahau. Nō Africa ahau. Ināianei e noho ana ahau ki Kaikōura. Thank you very much for having me on this show. I am the Community Services Manager here in Kaikōura which is the naval of the universe and it is absolutely beautiful in its rural setting. Mentioning rural, it brings along a whole different host of issues - strengths and also weaknesses - in an event. We had the Kaikōura earthquake in 2016 and there we did lots of research to show that actually we need to encourage the private sector to establish a retirement village and a dementia care facility because all those services do not exist here.  What we have is a hospital and we have 23 over-90s living alone in their own homes. When we heard that Level 4 was announced, we identified that we needed an administration person to help the medical centre identify 65-pluses. We talked to our Neighbourhood Support person and the churches and what that meant was that we could work on all our spreadsheets and we could put together phone trees and we managed to talk to every single person, 65 and over. In our case it’s only 854 people. We did the shopping for all of them plus all the pharmacy deliveries. We had lots of fun through lockdown and we managed to look after every single 65-plus year old who was enrolled in the medical centre.  So we didn’t step up as a Civil Defence emergency management operation, we just kept going as a community services team and we all just chipped in. We had elderly people who had a support system, we needed to just make sure that they still had it because of course it changes and if they had one, they only got rung once a week just to check and if they didn’t have a support system, then we would do wrap-around service like Meals on Wheels. Our North Canterbury Infrastructure Recovery Group is still fixing the roads up here, had a few extra laptops and they managed to peel them off and I think ten were divvied out to lonely older people in the community who didn’t have connectivity.  So there were the two groups. There were obviously the ones who were connected were doing far better than the ones who weren’t connected. But a lot of the non-connected ones, some out of choice and some out of - well, for whatever reason, did mention that they had never been so well looked after as in Level 4 lockdown. |
| Simon | Yes we found a similar story with some people and it was similar to the post-earthquake where there was a lot of outreach. And so what outreach brings forward is those people who might need something but who would not normally put their hands up. And so we assisted MSD during Level 4 to phone all of the over-65s they knew of in our area who they didn’t have an email address for - so the assumption was they don’t have a computer - and so there were over 6,000 people phoned and it showed a real difference across the age group actually.  And so part of the issue we have as an organisation, I raise it often with groups, is we tend to as a society homogenise the over-65 population. And when we think about it, 65 to 105 is a very large age gap and we would never consider the needs of a three-year-old and a 33-year-old in the same conversation; nor should we. And you know they’re not a homogenous group, they’re hugely different in what their needs are and actually what their expectations are.  So in phoning this MSD group, we found that the over-90s were actually pretty well connected and had systems in place already. The actual lockdown of them staying at home they said, well to be honest, we stay home most of the time anyway. We might go to church on Sunday, shopping with my daughter - so those things were stopped - but actually we’re used to being home. Similar with the over-85s, when we came back down that age range into certainly the 70s and early 80s, they were the group that felt most affected by this because they were used to going out and about, being socially active. So for them, this was a real hardship. |
| Susi | We had some stranded tourists who put their hand up when we put out the call for volunteers and there was this story in *The Press* about this South American couple that adopted a 90-year-old. |
| Simon | It was a great story. |
| Susi | It was just so heartwarming. So there were a whole heap of stories like that where older people connected with younger people who did their shopping and their pharmacy deliveries. There was one elderly woman who just had a hand operation and she couldn’t use a can opener, of course she had a lot of cans. So one of the shopper volunteers nipped out and got her an electric can opener because it was one of the success stories as well where she felt really connected and happy and heard. |
| Simon | There was a lot of that problem solving that went on for those individual cases and that’s what is needed at the time. |
| Sally | If we’re thinking about social isolation among older people generally speaking, I made the comment at the beginning that it’s a group that tends to be more socially isolated than others. In large part that’s because of physical ability, getting older, you’re not as able to get out and about. What are your comments around social isolation of older people, generally speaking? |
| Simon | Well I think it’s really important to set the definition of social isolation and really what we’re talking about here is loneliness. So social isolation is an objective thing. I can look at you and go what are your contacts? You are or you aren’t socially isolated. I can’t look at you and say whether you’re lonely or not because that’s a subjective not an objective thing. You know, loneliness is the perception of not having the social contact that you want.  And so using those definitions, you can be in a room full of people and still be lonely, and you can be socially isolated but not be lonely and we certainly see that. So the important thing is the subjective, the person who identifies that they are lonely.  There was a very large study released by Otago University a year or so ago which looked at well over 100,000 New Zealand over-65s and they found that 21% were lonely on that measurement, on that instrument, and so that’s a very large percentage. We had been working off overseas models which suggested 10% to 12% but actually in the New Zealand context - and it was great to see some research actually done locally - 21% of over-65s so it is a very large issue.  We would say as an organisation that loneliness for older people is probably the biggest issue facing that cohort today. |
| Susi | So what we’re trying to do is coaxing people into the available activities like ‘Sit and be fit.’ We have 17 little old ladies at this point - we’re hoping to find some men - who now come to the library where it’s warm, it’s social, and they do a weekly ‘Sit and be fit’ lesson with music blaring through the library, it’s very cute. And we’re trying to grow all these activities to support people coming out, meeting each other, having a chat and then forming little groups themselves to combat that social isolation/loneliness. |
| Sally | We might listen to our first interview now. We’ve got Jan Hayward and then we’ll come back and we’ll talk about some of the themes that have arisen through Jan’s interview. |
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| Jan | Hello I’m Jan Hayward. I was strictly on my own in Level 4, it wasn’t unusual because I have been on my own for over 25 years since John died and so I think in a way that was a help and I know from other women in the same situation, it’s not so strange to suddenly be locked down, and I have a family here in Christchurch who were a huge support.  In fact, my daughter Bronwyn rushed out the day before lockdown and got me a thing called a Rollator - and I love aqua jogging as my exercise for my knees - so she was worried about that and felt that something of a kind of outside walker would be good and it’s been really great because I’ve managed to get out. I walked regularly and I felt safe with it. People got out of my road as I charged along pushing my chariot in front of me! I live quite near Mona Vale so you can imagine it was lovely to be able to go over there and it was very quiet, just sort of half an hour to forty minutes most days which was a lot more walking than I’d done for ages. Also the streets were so beautifully quiet. Now I’m trying to remember that I can’t cross Riccarton Road, for example, without being very careful. So that was a good experience and has been incredibly helpful.  So obviously I had the support of that family for shopping but then I did learn to go online and do my own shopping and that worked well and I think that’s a great idea for older people. So then of course I had the odd visit from them through the door, never coming in until Level 3 when we joined our bubble. Their son Ben was home staying with them from his flat, his cheerful presence every now and again talking through the door was great too.  I think I was very fortunate in my lockdown experience. I did miss things though, I missed my friends very much, we were on the phone and we used video but it’s not quite the same, is it? I seemed to have quite a lot of activity groups that I belong too. I’m a bit of an octogenarian groupie. I belong to a women’s group that I’ve been in for more than 50 years and a lovely book group and we made email contact because we weren’t all quite technologically efficient so that was the best way for us to do it. I also belong to a singing group and that was just a disaster trying to sing together on video chat, I don’t know how they do it because I watched some Zoom sessions with other choirs and they’re wonderful but it’s not easy but we enjoyed the chatting. Also I’m a member of Kate Shephard U3A and they sent out lots of helpful pieces of material to read in place of lectures and I didn’t always get time to do all that but I appreciated getting it.  So those were the activities I missed and I’m certainly loving being back into those again now with my friends. Oh a movie group as well, haven’t actually got to the movies yet but watched a lot of those on television while I was locked up. I could say that I didn’t have a negative time in the lockdown period looking back on it. I thought a lot about planning things to do and didn’t always achieve them. I’ve heard about people cleaning out pantries and lots of diligent things like that that I didn’t actually manage that but I did a lot of reading and quite a bit of thinking. So I quite like that still time. I listen to the radio a lot and also, I have a granddaughter who hosts a breakfast programme for 95B FM, Rachel was on every morning and I’m able to listen to her on a podcast. So that meant a lot to me too, radio, and watching movies on Netflix was great.  But I also had a special little time with a South Korean family that I’ve got very close to, they live very close to me in a very small flat and I think lockdown must have been awfully hard for them with two very active young children. But they would go out for their daily walk and come past my place and I would get out on a little balcony and we’d shout at one another from the drive up to me, sort of a slightly Romeo and Juliet kind of a set up but it was just wonderful to see them and I think they enjoyed it too. Because we had such good weather at times, it helped a lot I think.  Sometimes I threw down the odd weird thing like a ball of wool or something that they would go off and make marvellous little pom pom people and I would go to my front door and find a tiny posy of little flowers that the little girl had picked as she walked along. The odd dandelion and just other little things tied together and left at my door, it was heart-warming. |
| Sally | It sounds like you’ve actually really quite enjoyed it. |
| Jan | I have quite enjoyed it and I have other friends who have felt the same way. I have had friends who found it lonely and that’s when you haven’t got family. I have got also very supportive neighbours. I know that I could have called on them and at times they did bring me things and left them at the door which I appreciated greatly but I did feel for the people for whom it wasn’t so much fun. I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘fun’ but I think I would have to say it was a positive experience for me.  One of the highlights of the day was the update from Jacinda and Ashley Bloomfield at 1pm and I know that so many people all over the country almost depended on that to just hear what was going on. How did we feel? Were we frightened of COVID-19? I was very aware of it; I was very careful about my handwashing and I actually had some sanitiser luckily so I kept an eye on that with the door handle etc. But I think from those daily updates, elderly people like me were given a confidence. Ashley has got this marvellously calm demeanour, hasn’t he, that you just feel you’re in good hands, he knows what he’s doing, the facts are there and I’ve got enormous confidence in Jacinda’s leadership.  I live quite close to the mosque so I heard the sirens that day, thank god I didn’t hear the shots but in the aftermath we had her leading us through that and I think that was wonderful. And again she’s done it for us. So I think I just was able to feel in good hands and as it got better and better and we were allowed to drop levels, Level 3 was fantastic when I could go over to my family and have a wonderful family dinner celebration with candles on the table - that was just a marvellous feeling.  And then now we’re able to be back to more or less normal activities and that’s wonderful, I just feel so grateful for New Zealand has pulled together as a team - as we’ve been told - and done it. So good on us, I think.  You asked about what good things have come out of the lockdown that I hope to carry on with and one is I have learnt a wee bit more about technology. I wouldn’t say it has been a lot but that’s been helpful. But I’ve also had wonderful times with video chats with my mokupuna and they are going to carry on. Last night I had fun with my six of my seven grandkids on a chat group and for a grandmother, nothing could be more special. |
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| Sally | Jan spoke a lot about the importance of having support from family, from neighbours, and that’s something that we’ve also mentioned at the very beginning of this show, obviously being no doubt the most important factor to how people felt during the lockdown.  Another issue she mentioned, though, that would be really interesting to focus on, is this idea of the briefing from the Prime Minister and the Chief Medical Officer and how that regular 1pm session sort of provided some structure to her day, but also provided clarity of information and that idea of messaging. |
| Simon | Yes we certainly hear from a lot of older people the same message. So it was very useful, I think, the medium that was used being the television. Everyone has a television these days whereas a lot of the other information that perhaps some of us were getting that was web based, cut out that group of older people who aren’t on the internet and don’t have that capability. So certainly it did set structure to people’s day. In fact, it set structure to my day too and I know all my staff tuned in at 1pm to get those updates. |
| Susi | I agree Simon, my whole team was asked not to schedule any meetings around 1pm/2pm just for that very reason. Because we were all isolated too, I’m a bit older as well, I needed to know exactly what was going on so I could brief the team what we needed to do and where we needed to put our focus. So 10/10 to Ashley Bloomfield and Jacinda of course, organising those and having that clear concise messaging, bringing in other people as the time went on to supply other information that we all needed. |
| Simon | It was certainly delivered very calmly, wasn’t it? It was fact based, it was supportive, it was encouraging and I think a lot of people felt quite a bit of security from those meetings. I actually found it interesting that Ashley only had one meeting by himself and then she was back and I think it probably was that message that she heard from perhaps the people around her, actually you being there and just delivering that message as the leader of our country was really important. |
| Susi | Yes and her friendly approachableness was very encouraging. Plus the fact that they didn’t dump really serious information on us like you know, we’re going down to Level 1 on the day. They would say, “We will brief you in a week’s time” so you could get yourself organised to know what was coming in the future. Having to work through the whole thing every day and get myself organised, it was very, very effective. |
| Simon | One of the issues I did have with the wider messaging, not so much that particular 1pm thing, was this ‘over 70s’. And I think it’s set us back a wee bit in the kind of ageist view society has of older people because really what they were talking about was health conditions. And so if you were over 70 and didn’t have other health conditions, actually you were no more at risk than anyone else. We knew from overseas that it was those heart conditions, lung conditions particularly, that were providing the bad outcomes of getting COVID. And going back to that phone conversation we were having with MSD people: we were ringing people in their 70s who actually got a bit offended that Age Concern Canterbury was ringing them. They wanted to know where the hell we got their phone number from and actually we were keeping them from work. So some of them were registered nurses popping off to a shift and so they didn’t feel vulnerable and they didn’t feel at risk and actually they felt quite capable of summing up, weighing up all of the risks and making decisions for themselves. Whereas some of the messaging, it seemed to us that there were guidelines for those under 70 but rules for those over 70 and certainly some of the feedback we’ve got from those in that 70 age bracket was we really didn’t appreciate that. |
| Susi | We had quite a few volunteers in the early 70s bracket, we were told no sorry we can’t get you to go around dropping off food. Yes, that was an issue that there was a cut off at 70 but I guess, you know… It’s a hard one, I wouldn’t want to have made that decision myself. |
| Sally | In terms of this idea of keeping in touch with people - and Simon, you’ve touched on it as well, the television versus the internet - Jan, for example, was relatively technologically capable. She was able to use the phone and Zoom and Facetime. But for people who didn’t have that technological capability - I’d be interested to see if that falls into age brackets as well in this over-65 group - but what were you seeing with people who didn’t have as much technological capability in terms of that isolation factor? |
| Simon | Yes it does come into age bands. Really interestingly, a bit of study that was done in New Zealand a couple of years ago showed that the cut off age for people stopping using technology and the internet was 83. And yes, even in our organisation we have people who are 97 who Facetime us all the time so they’re more of an exception to the rule. But at 83, it seemed most people stopped using and it didn’t seem to matter how active they were using emails and the internet beforehand, and what that research suggested was that perhaps because technology changes all the time, you get to an age where you just think, “I can’t be bothered investing the time and energy.” An example I always use is Apps. You know ten years ago, someone who was busy doing stuff on the computer, none of us had heard of an App. Now everything is App based and so yep, at that age group people tend to say well I can’t be bothered relearning that and it does create huge barriers and we’re seeing that right across all sorts of decisions. Stopping cheques for example. |
| Susi | I was going to say that, that was a big one. |
| Simon | It really is. And the way they’ve set up the tax system - which is kind of an aside - is the people most likely to need to pay back some tax are older people with investments because the rest of us, all our tax is done as we go. So they’re the most likely group and yet they’ve cut off the ability for them to pay by cheque and to give your listeners an example: we’ve got about 1,000 members of Age Concern, 80% pay their subscription by cheque, 80%. So it creates barriers for older people and it’s not OK. |
| Susi | We’re the same, Simon. Most of our older people like to use that as an excursion, to go and pay by cheque. We now have to run courses through the library to teach older people to become more savvy when it comes to online payments because we’ve identified that these banks are phasing out cheque usage very fast now and then what happens. |
| Simon | And it does hone in, as you’re saying Susi, the actual activity of the banking was secondary to the outing. |
| Susi | Exactly. |
| Simon | And it was people’s social connection and it was their going out and about and they knew the people they were dealing with and it was just part of their lives. And so that’s something we need to consider as a society when we’re making some of these changes. |
| Susi | It was security as well, to know that you could talk to somebody whether you’ve done the right thing, because your eyesight’s not that great anymore etc. Yeah, I think it will be a big loss. |
| Sally | We might move now to listen to our second interview which is from Anne Malcolm. |
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| Anne | I’m Anne Malcolm, I live in Christchurch and I’m 80 years old and live alone. My experience of lockdown was probably very similar to other people. It was something that we hadn’t ever anticipated in our lives but once it happened we were given a certain amount of warning about it and we were certainly well informed as to what it was all about so I guess we just got on with it and thought well this is what it is and this is going to keep COVID-19 out of New Zealand so we’re going to follow the guidelines that were given to us.  I then looked at my life and thought well all the things that I go out to and all the usual things that we fill our lives with, that’s going to stop so what am I going to do. I’m going to do some things that perhaps I thought I didn’t have time to do in normal circumstances because I’m busy doing lots of other things. I kind of thought well I don’t have to go anywhere so I’m going to put a few pointers into my life for the day and I must say I probably was a bit slow at getting going in the morning, I enjoyed reading the paper for a longer period of time.  I go to various exercise classes so I tried to revisit those in my own home and remember all the exercises in the Tai Chi class that I go to. Then I’d have another cup of tea and a chat to somebody… Probably one of the… well, one of the highlights, I suppose, of lockdown was the more structured and regular contact with my family. I’ve got four daughters, one who lives here so eventually she came into my bubble, but the three who live in other parts of New Zealand, we set up regular Zoom sessions and normally because they have such busy lives we don’t necessarily have time for these extended Zoom sessions. I’m not bad technologically but I needed a bit of help to get the Zoom flourishing. We had regular Zoom sessions with all the family twice a week and gradually learnt how to manage those so that we weren’t all talking at once.  I have one daughter in Auckland with three small children, so I have a five-year-old, seven-year-old, nine-year-old grandchildren, and she suggested that on Facetime, I read them some chapter books as they call them, every day between 11am and 12pm. Now normally they’re at school and I talk to them on Facetime on birthdays and holidays but in lockdown I had my 11am till midday story time. Quite apart from the fact that the children loved it, I revisited my own childhood and I loved reading it. So I don’t know who enjoyed the 11am to 12pm session more - the kids in Auckland or me!  Then they would take their phone through to the piano and they’d play me some bits and pieces that they’d been learning in their music lessons and another thing I did in lockdown, was I decided I was going to do an hour’s piano practice myself every day. I haven’t played the piano like that for years. So that took me until lunchtime. Then because the weather was so wonderful, I would go out for a walk around the block where I live with my trustee walking stick so I didn’t fall over and cause anyone any harm and there I met people in the neighbourhood also out walking and I’d never seen them before. I mean, I know my immediate neighbours and we would shout and chat over the fence to each other a lot, but on the walk I met people that I had never ever seen and we would have wonderful chats, we really did.  So… Oh that took me through until 1pm when I sat down with my cup of tea and my sandwich and I watched Ashley and Jacinda giving us the update which was another highlight of the day. Then what did I do? Probably read a book for a bit, did my piano practice. I actually love baking so somewhere in the afternoon I would bake because I have three teenage grandsons who live not far from me who eat everything that is ever put in front of them and then I would leave that at the front door and my son-in-law would deliver my groceries and pick up the baking. Oh at about 5pm I did some more exercises on my little exercycle thing that I’ve got, phone calls and the odd Zoom call. Well that was the day.  That’s how Level 4 in lockdown was spent. I did not feel lonely but then I’m fortunate that I have a daughter who is two minutes away from me and even though we didn’t break the rules and she didn’t break into my bubble until we got to Level 3 and I was able to go up to their place and that was great. So for me it was ok, yeah. |
| Sally | Did you have any worries at all during that time? |
| Anne | I felt that we were in good hands as far as COVID was concerned and I can’t say I was worried about, you know, getting COVID because I actually didn’t have contact with anybody. I didn’t go to the supermarket because I didn’t have to because I had someone to do that shopping for me. And I kept my social distance. I had a couple of ongoing health issues that I have anyway and the only worry I had when I was experiencing something not quite right with one of my ongoing health problems was oh what am I going to do. I knew that the GP wasn’t seeing people. So that sort of security of the health system there supporting me should I have needed it. Yeah that was a bit of a worry and in the end that was solved because I rang and had a phone consultation with a GP and with a specialist consultant and that was fine once I worked out that actually they were going to be there on the end of the phone and could talk me through the worries I had. |
| Sally | Anne, have you got any lessons or anything that you are hoping you are going to be bringing forward from this experience? |
| Anne | Zoom calls as a family where we’re all talking to each other twice a week, we are going to continue. I think my regular walking around this neighbourhood… I know people in that sort of wider neighbourhood that I didn’t know before so that certainly is going to continue. I’m enjoying getting back into normal life again but there will be some things I’m going to make sure that I continue to enjoy. |
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| Sally | Anne talked quite a bit about playing the piano and that engagement she had with her grandchildren, they played a bit of piano and she would play back to them which she obviously really enjoyed. And she talked also about revisiting her childhood and pulling some of her kids’ books off the shelves and reading those to her grandchildren via Facetime. So I’d like now to talk about how lockdown provided an opportunity for older people to reconnect with hobbies and pastimes, but also the flipside of the coin, disconnecting them from other social activities that they normally would be doing. |
| Simon | We certainly saw that through Age Concern. In fact, a lot of the over-65 population wanted to be useful and so many of them were actually getting in touch with us saying well what do you need and a lot of that came back to… you know, can we knit something, winter is coming? Can we bake something, make something that you can then deliver to another older person that needs it? So it was a time to re-look at those hobbies that we do and of course one of them is reading and a lot of people do read and that was a great example of what you just talked about, Sally, was people who normally read in reading groups so book clubs are very popular. And so people could still do their reading but they couldn’t do the social connection bit, so they noticed that loss. |
| Susi | I think Facetime and all the IT devices that we use, it doesn’t make up for the human factor for a lot of older people. Yes, they connect on that intellectual level but on the physical level it’s still quite lonely. I think we found that a lot of people were lonely no matter how much or how little they connected on the interwebs. We have these 23 90-something people that are living by themselves and going to the library and going shopping is the highlight of the week where they bump into people and they talk to people - and that just wasn’t there. Their whole structure of their day was missing. In Level 3 we tried to get some books out to people and just keep hold of them until Level 1 to combat some of that loneliness - but again, it wasn’t the physical contact and I think that was the main thing that was causing loneliness and isolation. Sure I can talk to you on the phone and I can talk to you via screen but it’s… For older people, it’s just not the same. |
| Simone | That’s a fantastic point, Susi, and we certainly found that. So normally we have a service called Accredited Visiting where we match a volunteer with a lonely older person and they go and visit them in their home for a minimum of an hour every week. We probably have 350 of those matched clients and that’s certainly the message they gave us. We got the volunteer visitor to phone them and we phoned them as well but it just doesn’t match the quality of the interaction when it’s face to face. |
| Susi | There’s some research done that when you’re on Facetime or any of these services, you are constantly picking up physical cues and of course you can’t find them so it’s really, really exhausting having one of those Facetime meetings, especially if you’re not used to it. I mean I had to get used to that way of communication and not wear myself out because it’s actually a whole different way of being. |
| Sally | I think that’s a great point, that exhaustion that comes with it. We might listen now to our third interviewee, Yasuhei Akiyama,who shared about his experience as an older Japanese man who has been living in Christchurch now for 25 years. |
| Male | I am now 79 years old and we moved to New Zealand 25 years old when I was 55 years old. Before in Japan I studied photography, I dreamed one day I wanted to live in a foreign country. |
| Sally | OK if you could maybe just talk to us please how you found the lockdown. |
| Male | First I didn’t take it seriously what happened, just very curious that unusual situation. I knew a little bit that it a pretty serious restriction, but I didn’t take it so seriously. I just afraid… two years I been suffering from COPD, you know COPD? It is about throat and the lung, it difficult to inhale. So I use inhaler but easy to suffer pneumonia, Corona as well. But it still I was optimistic. But one day I saw one of my daughter’s Facebook in English - usually I didn’t read English one but I noticed says ‘Yasuhei Akiyama’, my name. She wrote we have to keep rule in this situation because to save Yasuhei Akiyama and I was shocked. I thought I had to keep all of restriction because three daughters very worried about my health condition. So since then I didn’t drive for three months or four months except charge battery and also shopping or anything. My lifestyle not so changed before and after Corona. Watch Japanese TV, listening to music, gardening. My wife cooking Japanese cooking, much good as before because she can cook elaborately. We didn’t feel guilty to order a little wine but it not so essential shopping but I worried about my wife and my relationship always from morning to tea, two times we had quarrel but relatively peaceful life. I think I was very lucky. Outside a park and cemetery, goof for me, I took a walk. I watched a lot of epitaphs and it told me some history. Also some epitaph told some people’s sadness so I was very interested with epitaph. Also I found some Chinese epitaph. |
| Sally | Did you miss things about your normal life during lockdown? |
| Male | I really wanted to have lunch or dinner with my daughter or my grandson and granddaughter. But of course they keep social distance so they never came in my house. We can’t gather as family. |
| Sally | Did you miss any activities? |
| Male | Not many. Before I go to Riccarton Bush. I like talk a walk around there but I found another one. Outside dining but I enjoy dining in my house. I really think lucky not only having a good daughter but I had good time because of music. Ironically, my wife and I are happy under lockdown, Level 4, 3, 2, relatively normal life is coming back, economically, culturally, but we are not so changed because we are already retired. Not so much fear freedom but coming back, almost same under Level 2 or 3, in this couple of months, bank interest has plummeted down and I wanted to change my term deposit but it difficult to. It’s the only unsatisfying thing. Our only income pension and the bank interest. |
| Sally | Any lessons or anything you have learned that you want to continue. |
| Male | Washing hands. I am worried crowded scene. |
| Sally | Are you worried about Coronavirus now we are at Level 1? |
| Male | I am afraid in general that many other country, the first wave and then other wave so if we can go to other country and people coming in, still a little bit afraid of. My wife and I sometime chatting, we are very lucky to be living in New Zealand. New Zealand government are very fair and just comparing Japanese government, other government.  It’s funny, I love studying English when I was in Japan, it’s my fault just my wife and I speak Japanese every day and watching Japanese TV, eating Japanese food. If I work I meeting a lot of Kiwis or I making a lot of TV but only just family. |
| Sally | So you don’t see many New Zealanders in your day-to-day life? |
| Male | Just shopping but it’s just thank you. I don’t know why. Kiwi people are very friendly but is a problem, of course listening skill is very poor so “once again, once again, pardon, pardon.” It just make it harder for me. I love Japanese culture but I don’t want to go back to Japan. When I experience this lockdown, I found out a lot of positive aspects than before and I really am lucky to be here and have a family that’s for sure. |
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| Sally | Yasuhei spoke really beautifully about his daily walks around the neighbourhood, particularly about going to Somerfield Cemetery and reading the headstones and that it helped him learn about some of the history of Christchurch and he was really thrilled to see some Chinese headstones there - sort of that connection with both the history and the locality of his own space. And in fact, all three of the interviewees we’ve heard from so far have talked about just how important it was to get out and about during lockdown. But I’m wondering, what about those older people who weren’t so mobile and not being able to get out during lockdown, how that then impacted on social isolation. |
| Simon | It impacted quite a lot and part of that was around those people that would come into their lives to enable them to get out and about couldn’t. And so one of the upsides of the whole COVID thing for many of us was actually our exercise levels went up and we saw more people out and about walking because effectively it was all you could do. What that highlighted for those who couldn’t get out and about, was again it was just another thing that everyone was doing that they couldn’t and for a lot of people that was around the inability for someone to come in and support them.  For those as I mentioned before, those sort of over-90s who are used to living at home all the time or most of the time it wasn’t as big an issue but for those who are used to being out and about, it really impacted on them and exacerbated that loneliness. |
| Sally | Not only that, I can imagine just seeing something different. That sort of boost you get from a bit of a change of scene.  Yasuhei also spoke about financial security. I imagine that that financial security might be a worry for older people who are no longer working, don’t have an income coming in. I’d be interested to hear what you’ve got to say about that and also if you noticed other fears cropping up. I can imagine fear around actually contracting COVID, and another one I wondered about was scammers, you do hear stories about people preying on the elderly particularly and particularly at a time where there might be less security in place. |
| Susi | The fear of scammers was quite strong for us. So we were calling the older people once or twice a week to find out how they were doing, plus the community team and all the older people knew us. MSD also unsolicited started calling our locals as well and that caused great confusion and fear. That’s a thing we probably need to look at going forward, it should be a more coordinated effort. The other fear was, as you said, contracting COVID but not quite knowing how and so therefore not wanting to go out at all but needing to go for a walk and things. So do I go, don’t I go, what do I actually do. |
| Simon | The scam thing wasn’t just a fear either, it actually happened. So we saw an increase in the number of scams and you’re absolutely right, scammers generally target older people. And we had cases within Christchurch that we were dealing with alongside the Police where people were knocking on older people’s doors and saying look I know you can’t get out, I’ll go and do your grocery shopping for you, give me your card. At those times of stress where people who would otherwise see through these things go oh OK, yeah you’ve got a fluoro vest on and you look official so it must be OK and so people are far more at risk of falling for some of these scams so that’s concerning.  The financial side of things, I mean that’s been happening for a while so interest rates have just been plummeting. Yeah so some of those older people who have some money in the bank and they rely on the interest they were getting, perhaps that 8% or 9% a few years ago to live. You know, they’re now getting 1% or 2% and it isn’t enough to live. So what that’s going to look like moving forward, you’re right. It’s probably going to get worse and I think too, the other factor for particularly the over-65 group - so that’s 65 to 75 - is job losses and so we know for many years now, if you are 62, 63 and lose your job, you’re very unlikely to get another one because of ageist practices within employment and so that I think, will have a huge impact on not only the over-65s of today but those coming through in the next few years. |
| Susi | That shopping as the weeks dragged on, our elderly were starting to fear that they wouldn’t be able to pay it back. The understanding was that they would pay it back afterwards. So they had tiny little shopping lists with $40 or $50 worth for a week’s worth of food. So we were very concerned that they weren’t actually buying enough food to sustain them. |
| Sally | One of the comments Yasuhei made was around his hearing not being so good and although he was perfectly capable of sitting there having a conversation with me, he doesn’t feel very comfortable or confident going out having a chat out and about particularly with English being his second language. And so I guess just to kind of wrap up this conversation about Yasuhei’s interview: ethnic older people being more isolated by virtue of the language barrier, but then also exacerbated by all those issues of aging around the body as well. Just any comment around the isolation of ethnic older people would be great. |
| Simon | The over-65 population of different ethnicities, so non-Pākehā is going to be the biggest growth rate - so Asian, in particular, over-65s we’ll expect in the next 30 years to go up by 700%. They are something that our organisation is very much looking at how do we meet the needs, yeah, of a population who you know, may not have grown up here. Often those are grandparents being brought over by children, they have different cultural expectations and certainly they have huge challenges around the language and the assimilation into the culture. So we do find those people, when they get referred, are potentially even more isolated than some others because of those barriers. |
| Susi | That is correct and I think behoves all communities through their territorial authorities or through community groups, to get those newcomer networks up and running and functioning to help with that assimilation because I see that as a huge problem for communities. Also rural communities where actually everybody has got their little bit to play but they don’t come together very easily because there aren’t very many things that happen so we do need to actually work hard at that and create those networks and events where people can come together. |
| Simon | And going back to the health side of things, it goes back to that much earlier conversation about why older people are perhaps more lonely and more isolated than other groups (although teenagers are up there as well but for different reasons). And the reasons often for older people are those physical reasons. So if you can’t hear, if your mobility isn’t as good, incontinence is a big driver of social isolation and a huge issue with loneliness. So all of those health factors which often come with age and I think that’s realistically why they drew the line at 70 for the COVID message, was because actually by the time you get to 70 you are likely to have some of those conditions and it’s those conditions that really drive the issue of loneliness. |
| Sally | We might now listen to our final interview from Ruth Todd. |
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| Ruth | Hi, I’m Ruth Todd and I do a programme at Plains FM, a book programme, and I found it quite a strange experience during lockdown. Well of course it was a new experience for everybody. I’m in a house so we weren’t really locked down as far as not being allowed out the gate, it was just like if I lived in a normal suburb and what I did find great because the weather was so good, I went for lots and lots of walks around the place and that was fine as long as we didn’t go too many miles away and I really enjoyed that because the days seemed longer, I wasn’t trying to pack so much into them and yes, I got a lot of reading done, got a lot of gardening done, and it was quite comfortable really and I have a daughter not far away who picked up my groceries and I was part of her bubble and she was part of mine because she lives alone so that was easy, she could pop in and out.  I think probably after the novelty wore off, probably into Level 3, I broke my wrist in the garden and that was not so good because I wasn’t quite so able to do all the things I liked doing and it was quite difficult cooking but I felt a little bit isolated after that, partly because I… Well I wouldn’t have been driving very far anyway at that stage but as it got into Level 2 I was still in plaster. I spent a lot of time telephoning people all over and talking to people each day. I’m not great… so great on the computer doing Zoom and things. It was a little isolating but not too bad. I mean I was pretty well off really, you know, I had a mixed time I suppose because I wasn’t having people popping in or seeing people except for my daughter and that was great. I don’t think I could have survived if I had not had her to get my groceries and do a few things for me. |
| Sally | Would there have been other supports in place, for example, through your village? |
| Ruth | For people who didn’t have support, yes there were, there’s very good staff here and if people weren’t well or anything they can get help. People were able to have food delivered to their house or their apartment and those were mostly people who already did have not such good health and they were certainly cared for. But in the houses it’s independent living so I’m not sure how much you would have got done for you if you were in a house. I don’t know, I didn’t have to do that. |
| Sally | When you broke your wrist, how was the access to the health services? You said you broke it during Level 3. |
| Ruth | Yes Kate just took me to the hospital, to emergency department, and we sat for a couple of hours as you do and I was quite sure it was just sprained, it didn’t seem sore enough for a break. Well the x-ray showed it was a break so then I had to go to the other department where you get plaster put on which was a new experience for me at 85, never having broken anything before. But the health services were good. They had nothing to do in the plaster department because that day it was a Saturday afternoon and no sports people with injuries so they were quite delighted to see me when I came in. I’ve got no complaints at all; I think our health system do so well under a lot of restrictions really.  I think for people who perhaps didn’t have family in Christchurch, I think I would have… I have two granddaughters but they were in lockdown of course and they are flatting so I didn’t see them but I’d sent them texts and occasionally we rang. It wasn’t too bad for me really comparatively but if I was dependent on people from other places perhaps coming to see me or if I’d been going off for a holiday, I didn’t really have any plans for that time apart from going to Queenstown for an 80th birthday and I mean you obviously had to accept that but there was nothing urgent. None of my friends died, I didn’t have any funerals I couldn’t go to you know. I think I was lucky in that respect because I’m aware that some people have had a really quite difficult time for losing friends or family and I would have found that really bad.  But I suppose it didn’t occur to me that anybody around here would get it and I know rest homes were badly hit in Christchurch but I’m not in a rest home, I’m in a village, so the people who were in the apartments who needed more care, they were well looked after and their building was locked so we weren’t able to go in there or mix with them at all and they were very well looked after because they were seen as vulnerable. Whereas you know, apart from breaking bones, I’m pretty good health wise so if you’re an optimist, you can get through things much more easily and I just think I’m lucky to be still around at 85 and live every day to the full.  I think what the lockdown did for me was to teach me patience, I’m not a very patient person and I expect to be going here, there and everywhere when I can and when I want to and so I found that strange because I don’t stay home very home, I’m involved in some volunteering work in the community and I just had to acknowledge that we weren’t allowed to do that. But I’m a radio person too and I like listening to the radio a lot and I play music a lot so I wasn’t really bored but it did make me realise that one of these days I’m not going to be so able and I may be housebound more and I think you need much more patience than I’ve got at the moment to accept that. |
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| Sally | Ruth touched on a lot of themes that would be great to explore a bit more, one of which is the access to health services for people. She broke her wrist and was able to get help no problem but I think it would be interesting to hear from you both about how you found it for older people who might have ongoing health issues, for example. |
| Simon | We certainly know that older people didn’t look after their health as well as they normally would and so what I mean by that is access to GP and managing their chronic conditions. And so what we’ve heard from the general practice in Christchurch particularly was the fall away in people going in for those regular appointments and so when they finally did get in, they were perhaps not as well managed with their diabetes, with their heart failure and things like that.  Also we know that the majority of people in the health system are older people and so all the elective surgeries that got put off, that predominantly affected older people and so, yeah, people are living longer with conditions that otherwise would have been fixed by the health system.  One comment I would make around part of the health system, which was pharmacy, I think they actually did a fantastic job. We had a lot of concern, particularly early on, from older people saying how am I going to get my pills and we didn’t have a single time in Level 4 or 3 where we rang a pharmacy that they didn’t have a plan in place for that person. They knew their clients, they had delivery systems set up and they actually really impressed me. |
| Sally | That’s great. |
| Susi | Yes the medical centre pharmacy system worked really, really well here too. It was also contactless so the medical centre would send through the script and then the Uber Pharmacy person would pick it up and drop it off at the letterbox.  I think ongoing health issues for elderly in rural New Zealand is a huge issue. We are very lucky that we have got our new Kaikōura hospital or health centre but we are two-and-a-half hours away from Christchurch and we are one-and-a-half hours away from Blenheim. So all those things that you need to do after the operation, all those home visits etc. or even services to help you get washed etc. are quite thin on the ground. So we’re going to have to look at expanding those in rural New Zealand going forward if we’re going to look after all the older people in the way that is humane. |
| Simon | You’re absolutely right and part of my focus when I’m talking to government, when I’m talking to local government, is we want older people to age in their place. We don’t want people who live in rural Kaikōura to have to move to Christchurch because there isn’t anything to support them to live where they’ve lived all their lives. You know, that’s not a great fit for them and it’s not a great fit for our society. |
| Susi | Correct and that was highlighted strongly after the earthquake. It’s hard, rural New Zealand doesn’t have many ‘bums on seats’ so you know, a retirement village is a business and if there aren’t enough people to make it work it won’t happen and then the older people will have to get shipped out. It’s really sad and it’s not a great fit for whānau and families who live here, who want to keep their older people but can’t look after them. |
| Simon | There is an increased cost to looking after rural communities but as a society I think it’s a cost that we have to bear and whether that’s through central government or however, you know, it needs to be done. |
| Sally | I’m glad to hear that you’re talking about looking after people as they get older because that’s something that Ruth touched on as well. She spoke quite philosophically about how the slower pace of life during lockdown made her reflect on what life will be like for her as she ages further, particularly this idea of being more housebound as we’ve talked about before. And I thought that might be quite a nice point to end on: Any comment you’ve got around how you think lockdown will have impacted in the longer term. |
| Simon | Well I certainly hope, like her view of seeing how that might work, has worked for other people as well. And so we know that as we age, particularly when we get into our 90s, things do slow down and I don’t think as a society we talk enough about that or we prepare people enough for that. We don’t also prepare well enough for retirement either, it seems to all be financial considerations as opposed to actually what are you going to do and how you’re going to have an active and good retirement. So yeah, hopefully it will be the start of a conversation around that for organisations like ours, like councils, to perhaps put a bit more time and effort into this is how the life course goes for most people and so given that, how do we plan for that and how do we support people to age well. |
| Susi | Correct, I couldn’t agree more. I think there needs to be a much more intentional collaboration between central and local government, between local and the community NGOs and social service providers to ensure that every single older person that we’ve contacted during lockdown, that that kind of service continues and that out of that grow more activities for older people, more services that are encouraged to come to rural areas whether there are enough people to make it pay for itself or not. So that cross-sectoral collaboration that happened in lockdown for our community, I would like to see continuing for the whole of New Zealand going forward. |
| Simon | There’s certainly a real gap in central local government and business around acknowledging the changing demographic of our population. You know, we’re not far off having one in four people in New Zealand will be over 65 and yet it really is a lacking focus across all of those areas which you know, working in the field doesn’t surprise me to a level but I am amazed when I go to meetings with these groups that it isn’t more of a focus. So the financial levers that the government and central bank can pull, when they pull that lever are they considering what is this change going to mean for 25% of our population? From what I’ve seen, it isn’t. |
| Sally | Just to wrap up, we’ve heard from four interviewees and there are some really striking parallels between their stories actually. They all have family living nearby and they were able to support them particularly in terms of doing their grocery shopping; they were all relatively mobile and they could get out for a walk; they all had some technological capability and through that were able to retain contact with friends and family; and generally speaking, they all had a positive experience of lockdown and no doubt because of all those reasons that I’ve just mentioned.  However, I do query whether that generally positive experience is representative of older people as a cohort - and we already talked about how difficult it is to make any kind of generalisation - but just a really brief comment to that would be great. |
| Simon | So the majority of people who access Age Concern Canterbury services are different to that. So they don’t have family close by, their daughter lives in Auckland or London or wherever, they tend to struggle with that day-to-day living and need support to do that and just don’t have, I guess, that community. And we see this in rural areas - I’d be really interested in Susi’s comment of Kaikōura - but what I’ve seen over the years working in health is rural areas actually do way better at supporting those who need support. So people know their neighbours and they help out. Whereas we’ve seen the urbanisation and the change to how we live in Christchurch in particular, a lot of older people that we talk to don’t even know their neighbours. That isolates them even more. |
| Susi | That certainly is the case, a lot of older people here in rural Kaikōura do get out and about and see each other but the problem with lockdown was that they were far away from their family and they didn’t have much contact with people in London or other parts of New Zealand. So my challenge is what we need to do as a country going forward is create jobs in rural New Zealand to keep families rurally or wherever they are, to have that sort of localism and you grow old with your young family coming through and taking care, that’s what I would like to see. |
| Sally | That seems like a really lovely place to finish off. Susi and Simon, thank you so much. Kia ora mō te wā. It’s been a really fascinating conversation and I hope that it encourages our listeners to think somewhat differently about the term ‘older people’ and also the term ‘social isolation.’ |
| Simon | Thanks for having us on. |
| Susi | Kia ora. |