

# FOCUS ON WORKER HEALTH



Courtesy Fonterra

## SAFEGUARD

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Fonterra adjusted its previous one-size-fits-all health monitoring programme to make way for a risk-based approach to health and wellbeing, centred on workers. **JACKIE BROWN-HAYSOM** reports.

In 2016, Fonterra's occupational health nurses signalled they were struggling to keep pace with the existing compliance-based worker testing regime.

In the annual staff engagement survey they reported feeling undervalued and under-utilised, with a strong desire to change their way of working. Nurses having to carry out a full battery of health tests every year on every worker, no matter what their exposures, had become an unwelcome disruption for workers and managers alike. Adding to this was that each nurse worked in isolation from other nurses as they collectively covered each Fonterra site in New Zealand.

It was clear things had to change, so in late 2017 Fonterra created a national health and wellbeing team, bringing together its 16 occupational health nurses and three rehabilitation nurses under new leadership. Auckland wellbeing practitioner Nick Salter was appointed wellbeing lead, Manawatu-based occupational health nurse Clare Lynn, previously a consultant to Fonterra, joined the staff as the practice leader, and Terry Buckingham – himself a trained OHN – was made head of health and wellbeing.

The changes begun then and progressively rolled out won Fonterra the best work-related health category at the 2020 NZ Workplace Health & Safety Awards.

### RISK-BASED APPROACH

Starting point for the new team was a

comprehensive review of existing health and wellbeing programmes in the light of international best practice, New Zealand H&S laws and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

It wasn't easy, Buckingham says, with a raft of inconsistent and sometimes conflicting policies and practices to work through. But by the end of 2018 the team had a new company-wide health and wellbeing strategy, founded on the core principles of health and wellbeing promotion, prevention and protection.

"It was a real change in thinking," he says. "We started looking at what health means to Fonterra, and working with our people to find out what was important to them.

"Too often, health and wellbeing had been regarded as the stuff we did after we'd done everything else, but we wanted to make it part of everything we do."

One of the first tasks under the strategy was to identify the health risks for every work situation, so testing could be tailored to specific work-related needs.

With 12,000 workers across the country, including farmers, tanker drivers, laboratory workers, office and manufacturing staff, it was no easy brief, but the team identified core roles and assessed the true health risks for each one.

### REDUCED TESTING

The result, Lynn says, was a radically reduced testing regime.

"We used to do an annual test on everybody – hearing, lung function and



**Clare Lynn and Terry Buckingham: moving away from a one-size-fits-all health testing regime has allowed nurses time to expand their role into health promotion and preventative measures.**

the rest – even though they might not have had those exposures. And it would take up all your time, so there was no opportunity to just engage with people – ask how they were doing, what was important to the person or the team, and if there was anything we could help with.

As health professionals in the workplace, she says, nurses have to get the balance in favour of interventions and programmes rather than testing for testings' sake.

“Now we’ve tailored it to exposures, it allows us to have those valuable conversations and do what matters for our people.”

The company made sure the amended regime had WorkSafe’s seal of approval, because what was proposed wasn’t necessarily in accordance with accepted practice. The ‘Noise in the workplace’ approved code of practice, for example, says workers in noisy workplaces should have their hearing tested annually.

“However there is international best practice to support less frequent testing, so WorkSafe was supportive, provided everything we did was risk-based and there were good reasons for the changes.”

### ROLE EXPANSION

With fewer tests to conduct, nurses soon found their roles expanding, being free to work with managers and workers on harm prevention initiatives and to support workers with personal health conditions.

“There’s been a shift in perception,” Lynn says. “They know we’re not just here to do the hearing tests. During a health appointment, with the door shut, the cork comes out. People tell us what’s going on for them, which is fantastic because it means we can work through

real issues with our people and navigate them to the right support channels.”

A stronger focus on health promotion enabled the team to build new ways of supporting Fonterra workers and whānau, including the Good Yarn peer support mental health programme, and a post-traumatic incident response programme which includes early psychologist assessment and a return to work programme.

Other examples include family violence support, and health support plans for workers with long term health conditions.

It’s a big plus for the company too, allowing potential health issues to be identified early, and appropriate supports put in place – in consultation with the worker and their manager – so conditions can be managed within the workplace in partnership.

The changes to the nurses’ role go well beyond the consulting room, however.

The new team structure allows individuals to build and share expertise in specific areas – such as hearing protection or safety eyewear – in a way that was not previously possible, and Lynn says this has had significant benefits for both the nurses as individuals and the team as whole.

The OHNs also have more time to go onsite, and with good buy-in at every level of the organisation key to the programme’s success, all have received training in leadership, coaching and influencing skills.

### TEAMS TAKE OWNERSHIP

Buckingham acknowledges that some were a little uncomfortable with this initially, but points out that OHNs have long had the ability to stand people down

from work on medical grounds, so using their specialist knowledge and skills to influence outcomes is actually nothing new.

“In practice, influencing can be as simple as suggesting that, instead of talking about valves and pumps at the regular all-staff meeting, they have some conversation about the Five Ways to Wellbeing.”

Despite the focus on leadership, there is nothing prescriptive about the team’s approach. Buckingham talks of providing structure for the directions in which people are already moving, and says work teams are actively encouraged to take ownership of health and wellbeing in whatever ways are meaningful to them.

“We get involved in what they want to do rather than just doing stuff to them,” he says. “The distribution centres, for instance, are very keen on Movenber. They’ve taken real ownership over the years, and they raised \$18,000 last year.

“We’ll never have enough health professionals on the team to offer end-to-end service, but we will have enough people if we can get everyone participating.”

“It’s important that we don’t do ‘health’ to our people, but encourage and support health prevention and promotion, by our people for our people.”

### COVID CREDIBILITY

The health and wellbeing team is one of only a handful of groups within Fonterra that works across the organisation as a whole, covering multiple business units and more than 40 sites within New Zealand, and at the same time providing oversight for the company’s international operations.

All this can be a stretch at times,

**“WE USED TO DO AN ANNUAL TEST ON EVERYBODY – HEARING, LUNG FUNCTION AND THE REST – EVEN THOUGH THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE HAD THOSE EXPOSURES ... NOW WE’VE TAILORED IT TO EXPOSURES, IT ALLOWS US TO HAVE THOSE VALUABLE CONVERSATIONS.” CLARE LYNN**

Buckingham says, but one thing that has really helped build the team’s visibility and credibility across the wider organisation is Covid-19.

“Managers relied on us a lot for expert help,” he says. “Clare has a background in infection control, and I have had some training in epidemiology, so they drew on our experience to get the business through.

“When Jacinda and Dr Bloomfield were making decisions we were able to convert the government guidelines into practical business advice – and to share it with partner organisations.”

### SHARING THE MODEL

Such sharing of expertise for the greater good is another part of the team’s core ethos.

“The challenge for us is how we bring other businesses along with us,” Buckingham says. “Some large companies want to keep all their toys

to themselves, but we are trying to influence; to say here’s a model, here’s our policy – it’s helpful, please use it.”

Overall, workplace health and wellbeing is not yet well understood in New Zealand, he says, and this is holding some organisations back from wanting to work in the area.

“When I ask business leaders what health and wellbeing means, often they will pick out chunks, but they don’t really have the big picture.

“Fortunately I think most businesses now recognise that they don’t have to see the whole staircase before they take the first step. That’s where we were three years ago, and if we can help others start that process it’s a win-win.”

### BEHAVIOUR CHANGES

Although Fonterra uses surveys and measures participation rates and a



variety of other outcomes to monitor the strategy’s success, Lynn and Buckingham agree that for them the best indicator of success is seeing positive changes in behaviour and people’s lives.

“It’s the people stories and the ripple effect that show what’s real,” Lynn says, citing the way the Longburn and Pahiatua transport teams have just taken on a heavy load in support of the Cancer Society’s Relay for Life. One team manager, Michael Woodfield, challenged six transport crews to pull a truck 50 metres and reverse a truck and tanker 90 degrees for bragging rights. Starting at 6am before shifts crews competed across three weeks, raising a total of over \$2500.

“In the end, it was a way to drum up excitement and team connection, with drivers giving it a go and raising money for a good cause. It shows the power of letting people take the lead instead of having us tell them what to do.”

