



‘Human spirit’ alive in a crisis

◆ **REWARDING CHALLENGE:**
St Catherine’s nurses Steve Voogt and Heila Brooks took away a lot from their experience in Melbourne’s aged care facilities during the second wave of COVID-19. PHOTO: Kieren Tilly

By **NICK SINIS**

AFTER enduring the dreaded COVID-19 ‘second wave’, St Catherine’s Hostel nurses Steve Voogt and Heila Brooks believe the human spirit is very much alive during a time of crisis.

The nurses were sent to provide assistance to two aged care facilities in north and west Melbourne during the months of August and September throughout the second outbreak.

Mr Voogt, who was stationed at a facility in the northern suburbs and works as a nurse practitioner for St Catherine’s in Wangaratta, said the situation was confronting when he arrived, as the centre had already more than 30 cases of COVID at the time.

“The experience was something that I have never experienced before in my life,” he said.

“I was basically coordinating the care, then my role became clinical and I was coordinating the care for the staff.

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“The permanent staff were either off with COVID or isolating, so we actually had staff placed with mostly nurses from the Epworth Hospital and the Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH).

“So it was very, very difficult because we didn’t know any of the residents, we didn’t know where any of the equipment was and there was no communication with the staff.”

Mr Voogt said workers, including himself, often had to endure long 14 hour days without breaks or days off.

“We’re trying to care for the residents with all those issues and the barriers, it was very difficult circumstances with very sick residents,” he said.

“The fact we all had to have full PPE as well and worrying about getting COVID yourself.

“The RMH and Epworth Hospital nurses were very good, they were all young nurses that had no aged care experience and volunteered, they were excellent.

“I think those nurses had pulled the weight of the crisis in Melbourne.

“It bought out the best in the human spirit, I really saw that in the nurses and I think that’s what really got us through.”

Ms Brooks, who works as a care manager for St Catherine’s and was sent to the western suburbs, said although the experience had been demanding, there were many positives to take away.

“I went down as a nurse advisor and half of the residents were COVID positive and half of the staff was either positive or isolating,” she said.

“We had residents that were positive but most of them weren’t

symptomatic, it just affects people in such different ways but those who do get sick, get very sick.

“But I thoroughly enjoyed it.

“I feel extremely confident now with staff management in an outbreak situation, with Steve and I, we would be in good stead to manage if anything happened up here.”

Ms Brooks said the experience also put into perspective the tragic impact restrictions have had on elderly residents in aged care.

“Some of the residents had been in their rooms for four months,” she said.

“The impact it has on them with no visitors, no family, no activities or anything because the infection controls measures was so tight.

“That’s taken its toll on families and residents...there is a psychological impact.”

FEATURE STORY



◆ **STRONG TEAM:** Steve Voogt and Heila Brooks are confident they would be well prepared if an outbreak was to ever unfortunately occur in Wangaratta. PHOTO: Kieren Tilly