

A Day in the Life of a Renal Nurse

Patients and staff at Taranaki Base Hospital's Renal Unit are like one big family.

At reception, there's a Happy Birthday message to one of the patients on the whiteboard. Staff members in a nearby office are on the phone wishing him a good day.

Many of the patients come in for dialysis treatment three times a week. They are made to feel welcome and at ease during what can be a stressful time in their lives.

There are 10 dialysis machines in one large room so clients are never short of company. Staff join in their chitchat and make sure they're comfortable during treatment, which normally lasts four hours. Liz Coombes and Neil Hartley, who are among 12 renal nurses at Base Hospital, enjoy the interaction with patients.

Liz worked in ICU for 20 years before specialising in renal nursing. She transferred to the Renal Unit more than two years ago.

Neil has been with the unit for three years – before that he was a renal nurse at Middlemore Hospital. It is recommended nurses have at least two years post graduate experience before moving into the speciality. There are study options available but most of the learning is on the job.

Taranaki's Renal Unit opened in 2001. Before that, patients travelled to Auckland for dialysis. Demand for treatment is increasing by 10% each year and the unit is regularly at full capacity.

There are two types of dialysis treatment – peritoneal dialysis can be done in patients' own homes, while haemodialysis is mainly available at the hospital. Patients are encouraged to become as independent as possible and perform their treatment



■ Renal Nurses Liz Coombes and Neil Hartley with patients Larissa Shewen and Phyl Deacon, who are both members of the Taranaki Kidney Support Group.

at home if they can. Haemodialysis is necessary in the advanced stages of kidney failure, which is most commonly caused by diabetes, hypertension, and other immune and hereditary disorders. An artificial kidney is used in haemodialysis. Blood is pumped by a machine through a dialyser to filter out waste and extra fluid from the body.

The first dialysis patients arrive at the Renal Unit at 6.30am and the last leave at 7pm. They range in age and come from different backgrounds.

The first thing they do is weigh themselves. The nurses need to know the patient's exact weight to work out how much fluid to remove during dialysis. Some are able to connect themselves to the machines, depending on what type of vascular access they have.

The nurses observe the patients during the whole dialysis process, regularly checking their blood pressure and the machines. It gives them plenty of opportunities to get to know the patients. "Some look forward to coming here for the company," Liz says.

Patients spend their time listening to music, reading or watching movies.

Some have been on dialysis for up to 30 years. Without it they would have died.

Patients can be assessed to be placed on the waiting list to have a kidney transplant, which gives them hope of one day not relying on dialysis. Transplants are performed in Auckland and patients return

for follow up care through the Renal Unit. They come back to see staff and catch up with other patients.

Liz says it's one of the highlights of the job. "It's always nice to see them again."

She is often amazed at the positive attitudes and inner strength of dialysis patients. "At first they come in shell shocked, but they get into a routine and settle. They know they've got to keep going for their families."

Neil says it's important renal nurses have good communication skills. "You've got to make patients feel welcome, otherwise they won't want to come back." He likes the regular contact with patients. "Long-term care is what I really do enjoy."

- World Kidney Day is 12 March 2009. The campaign focuses on the importance of our kidneys and reducing the frequency and impact of kidney disease worldwide. This year, World Kidney Day highlights the importance of high blood pressure as one of the key symptoms and causes of chronic kidney disease.
- The Taranaki Kidney Support Group will be providing information about kidney disease outside Bell Block Warehouse, between 10am and 3pm, on 11 March. A renal nurse will be New Plymouth's Club Health on 12 March between 10am and 12noon. Nurses will be available to answer questions from the public at the Renal Unit on 12 March between 9am and 11am, and again from 2pm-4pm.