

Pacific staff connect family with cancer patient under lockdown



Reverend Vaegaau "Au" Liko thought about the elderly Samoan man on his screen then said a prayer. The man, an elder from the reverend's church, was suffering from cancer and had been alone facing surgery in Wellington Regional Hospital because of Alert Level 4 visitor restriction rules.

Reverend Au tried to get the man's daughter in to see him but they couldn't do it so Tofa Suafole Gush, Director of Pacific People's Health, linked the family through FaceTime to talk with him before his operation.

"It was the next best thing. It's not natural for a Samoan to leave them there, their parents, by themselves," he said. "That's the beauty of our Pacific units at the DHBs. They can communicate with the families. The surgery was a success – praise God – and he has been discharged."

Reverend Au, who is also the chairman of the Pacific Health Service Hutt Valley, shared a similar story involving his father-in-law, who suffered a stroke, being comforted in Samoan by a member of the Pacific Health Team at Hutt Hospital.

"For Samoan and a lot of Pacific Islanders, there's a real significance to the Va – our relationships. It's physical as well as spiritual. It's hard when that connection is broken."

Some traditional practices had to be put on hold because of the lockdown. Families would have gathered and spent time with the body of their loved one before burial have instead opted for cremation.

"That's been tough: not being able to be part of their loved one's last days. A lot of families never thought they would cremate, but it allows them to take the ashes home for a service later."

The church plays a major part in many Samoan lives, as a spiritual place and one where migrants can feel comfortable in their language and culture. He has seen live video connect 22 families with his services during lockdown.

"We are very fond of Tofa and the team in our hospitals," Reverend Au said. "They help to alleviate the pain and the suffering."