



## Zero cases in the region but their work isn't over yet

March 14 was a red-letter day when the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was announced in the Wellington region. Almost exactly two months later on 13 May, Regional Public Health (RPH) announced there were zero active cases remaining in the region.

That journey was an intense but rewarding ride for Keith Lewis, Dr Saira Dayal and the more than 130 other RPH staff who dropped their normal roles and stepped into sometimes foreign territory to work on the COVID-19 response.

Prior to the first confirmed case, RPH had stood-up an Incident Management Team (IMT). Keith is the operations lead who oversaw the case investigation, contact tracing, daily monitoring, border control, quarantine control, and call centres workstreams. Saira is the medical lead in the IMT, whose usual role is in quality and safety in Hutt Hospital. A public health specialist by trade, Saira was quick to offer her skills.

Ironically, as COVID-19 was percolating away in China in early 2020, RPH's pandemic plan was under active review.

"We were already monitoring how this disease was spreading and planning our response. We had people meeting flights at the airport, but reality hit when we got our first case and had to immediately scale up our capability," says Keith.

Fifty nurses were deployed into case investigation, contact tracing and daily monitoring. Health protection officers, normally working at the border, expanded their roles. Others who do health promotion were trained in work they had never done before.

Saira and Keith are quick to congratulate the team on stepping up and just getting on with doing the massive amount of work required to contain COVID-19.

"Alert Level 2 brings some apprehension but we are confident we can manage, and we will do what needs to be done."

It's not over yet, they say. RPH's role involves working closely with vulnerable communities throughout the region who are impacted by unemployment, inadequate housing, and the welfare needs associated with that.

"Even when the disease is gone, we know a lot about how economic recessions cause harm to our communities, so our work will go on for a really long time."