Rural Nurses' Practice from Aotearoa During COVID-19: A Study Recognising their Pioneering Spirit Persists

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Acknowledgments

Sam and I are grateful to the following, for their participation in this project, during level 3 & 4 of COVID- 19 lockdown in 2020:

- **Rural Nurses from Aotearoa who gave up their valuable time to share their experiences and stories and agreed for those to be broadcasted on radio**
- **Otago Access Radio and Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin to broadcast these podcasts**
- **Griffin Leonard for transcribing the radio interviews and data analysis**
- **Research and Professorial funding from Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin**
- **Journal of Nursing and Practice for publishing our article related to COVID-19 free of charge.**

Background to the Study

Stemmed from a larger research project (2016-2019):

- to capture stories from rural nurses from Aotearoa published in *Stories of Nursing in Rural Aotearoa: A Landscape of Care* (Ross & Crawley, 2018)
- to shine light on their innovative practice from the previous three decades
- to consider practice throughout a significant time of change
- when governance and funding structures gave way to new models of practice
- identified a pioneering spirit – adapting nursing practice to a changing landscape

National Study - Aims

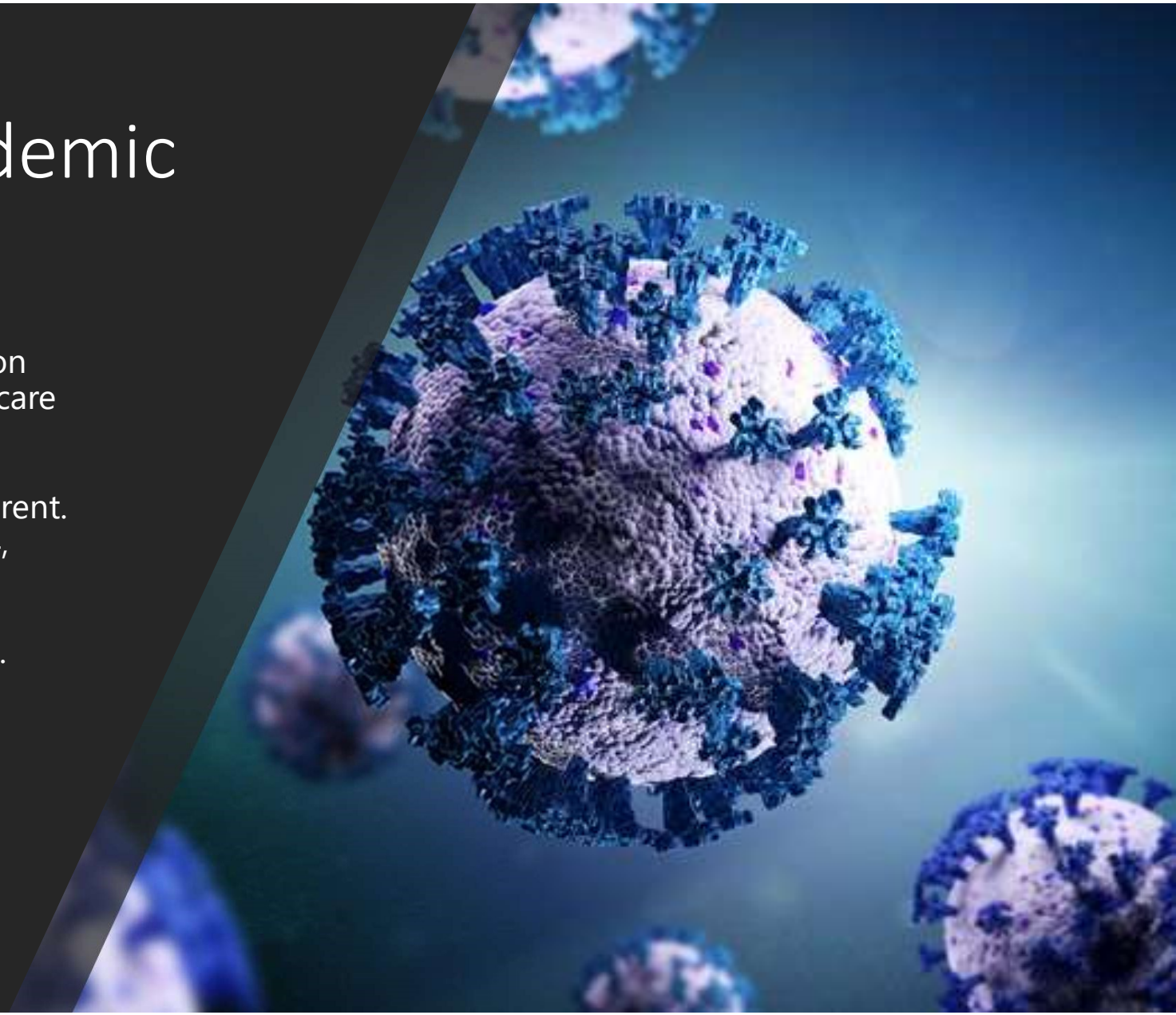
There was two aims to this qualitative interpretavist study:

- to collect and analyse if/how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the practice of rural nurses from Aotearoa
- To compare whether the pioneering spirit continued in a similar vein as to the changing health care system identified in the larger research project was evident during COVID-19

Ethical approval was originally obtained from Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee in 2017. Ethical permission was extended to accommodate further interviews from the original rural nurse participants who consented to participate in the original study.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Preparing the health system for increased community transmission placed a high demand on healthcare professionals in urban and rural centres. Moreover, the risks to healthcare workers became apparent. At the conclusion of Alert Level 4, one in ten of all those who had contracted COVID-19 in New Zealand were healthcare workers.



Questions we posed:

How have you prepared for COVID-19?
Has COVID-19 changed your practice?
How has/is your rural community adapting to COVID-19?
Have there been any challenges you hav encountered?
What does the future look like?
Open the space for you to add additiona thoughts

Research Process

Participants:

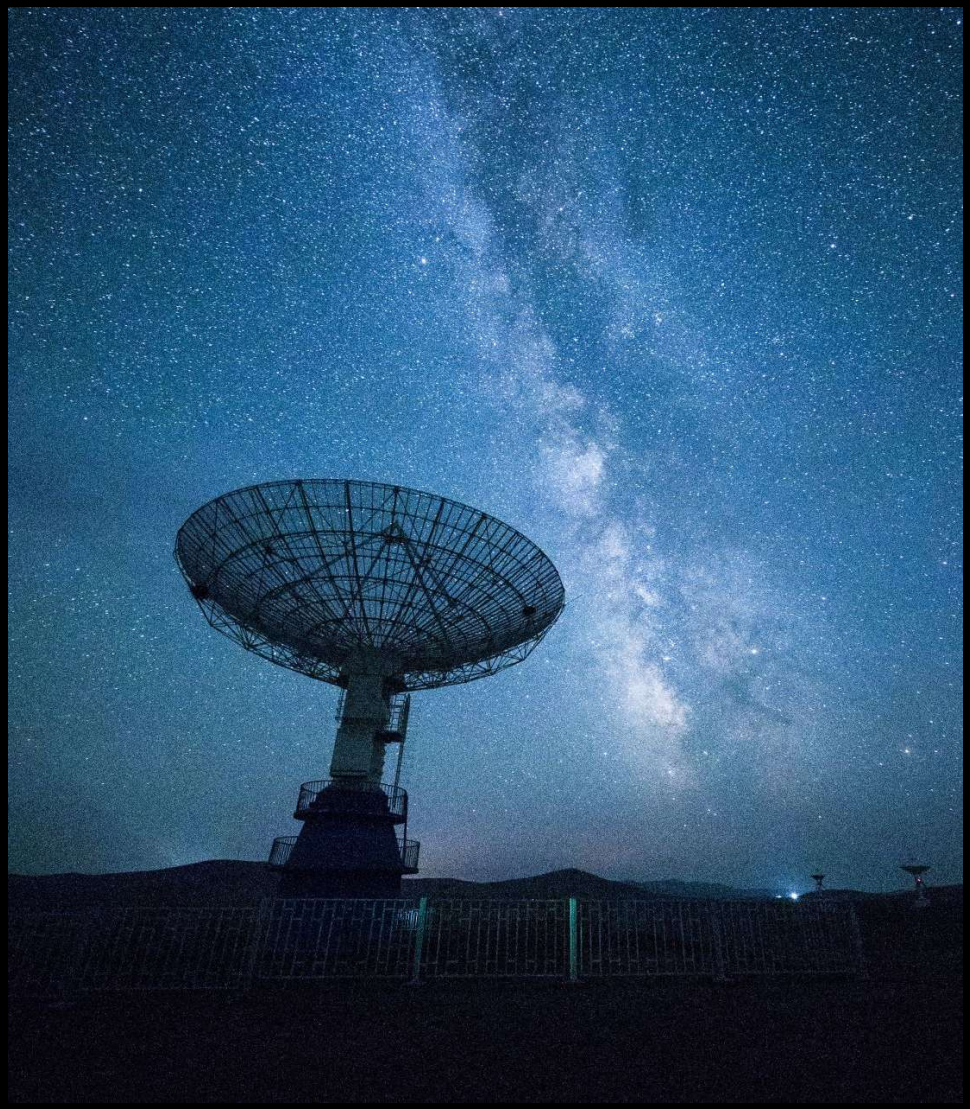
- all original 16 rural nurses were contacted by email inviting them to contribute from the larger research project
- Nine participants from Northland to Southland inc East & West coasts agreed to participate and were interviewed

Interviews:

- digitally recorded via zoom meeting
- Interviews were edited – removing some identifying features of individuals mentioned
- Developed into Podcasts
- Broadcasted of Otago Access Radio
- Thematically analysed

Otago Access Radio – *Blowing Bubbles*

Podcasts consist of positive conversations with people from around the world related to COVID-19



Jean Ross
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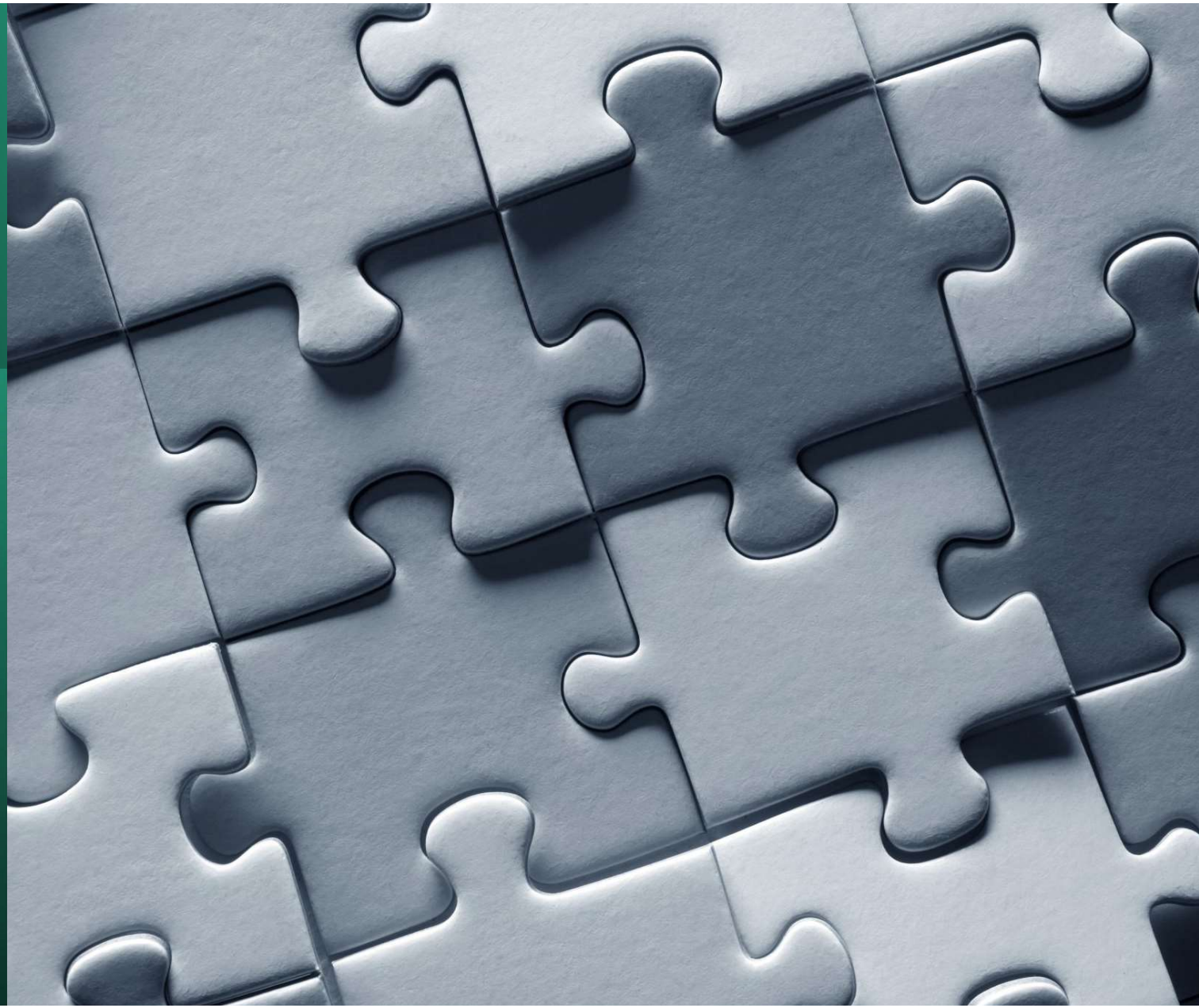
What did we uncover?



Rural Nurses as welfare providers

as soon we went into Level 4 we started working really, really closely with our [local authority] Council. I have to say building relationships at a time like this, and having good relationships in your community, is key (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

For a lot of patients, it was reassurance in the first instance. For a lot of patients, it was the first call from a health professional to say "How are you? How are you doing? What's your bubble like? How are you managing? One old man I talked to hadn't been out for food for four weeks and was running out of food. So, I managed to get a food parcel dropped to him because he was frightened to come into town (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

I saw one elderly man… he was like "I really need to go to the supermarket, but I just don't know"… so it was a phone call to [local authority] Council and by that afternoon his shopping was done for him. So, it's that kind of community buy in and communities working together, which I think you really have in rural communities… (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

Also was noted:

- Practicing at a distance – social distancing and uptake telehealth
- Upskilling or acquiring new knowledge on the job
- Rural Communities rural nurses acting as role models in their daily interactions
- Healthcare disparities and vulnerable populations
- Economic dynamics and consequences

As for our community, it's really grim. There's something like 60% unemployment in hospitality and tourism. So, those people are here not working and trying to survive… we're starting to see a lot of mental health issues and financial strain… there's quite a lot of drug use we're seeing coming through…(Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

Rural Nurses as community educators & effective collaborators

A lot of them [community members] were following on the news every night… they were asking us the questions, us as the first health professionals they were talking to… so we were the transmitters of up-to-date health information on a daily basis… we were the teachers about this disease process… and the encouragers (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

…spending quite a lot of time educating the community about how to stay well, about how to recognise symptoms, what to do if they see symptoms… (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

rly on, probably in February [2020], we started seeing who could potentially be COVID patients… So, we kind of having a heighted sense early on in the piece before Ministry of Health and things really ramping up… at the end of February we activated our pandemic emergency management team… we needed to get some things in place pretty quickly. We started meeting on a twice-weekly basis… we set up isolation tents out the back of our practice… were pobably

Rural nurses enhanced their practice as community educators and effective collaborators with a variety of local colleagues and members of their rural communities, drawing attention to community resilience and the rural nurses' pioneering spirit.

Community resilience, working and supporting each other

This pandemic is just one in a string of fairly regular issues… a few months ago we had massive flooding… I think it just is another example that rural communities are quite resilient… whether it's a pandemic or a flood, what we see in rural communities is that we can rely on each other… I wasn't expecting anything less it is always, though, affirming… when you see it again (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

Our tourists have gone, is the reality, and we are now back to community… things are not great here in our community. We have phenomenal unemployment. We have redundancies left, right and centre but at the heart of it are those people who truly love this community… and that has been really nice because we rally around each other… so it's definitely brought back the heart of our local community (Rural Nurse, podcast 46).

Rural nurses' pioneering spirit- Recognition

- *This pioneering spirit initially identified in the 1990s has continued in a similar vein, during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Further led us to reflect on lessons learnt from nurses' experiences and practice associated with the New Zealand 1918 flu pandemic where a parallel can be drawn.

Reflection

the unprecedented circumstances identified in this study leading us to recognise the vital practice contributed by rural nurses and engage with their narratives to inform practice, education and policy development,

Limitations

This research was conducted during New Zealand COVID-19 lockdown when a small number of rural nurses were invited to contribute

These rural nurses were a convenient smaller sample of the original rural nurses' research project who had originally agreed and consented to contribute to the larger research process limiting the significance of the results.

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References

Ross, J. & Crawley, J. (2018). *Stories of Nursing in Rural Aotearoa: A Landscape of Care.* Rural Health Opportunities; Dunedin, New Zealand.

Ross, J., Mann, S. & Leonard, G. (2020) Rural Nursing During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Snapshot of Nurses' Experiences from Aotearoa New Zealand. *J Nurs Pract 3*(1):186-192.

Open to Questions?

Thank You