

“Be part of it”—Matamata COVID-19 survivor wants others to share experiences

COVID-19 survivor Hamuera Evans estimates it took him just 30 seconds to be infected by the Delta variant back in March 2020.

The 42-year-old fencing contractor was working part-time as a DJ in a Matamata bar when he met up with two mates. One had recently returned from Ireland and the other from Queenstown.

“During one of my set breaks, I went to the bar to get a drink and they were there,” recalls Hamuera. “I only had a small window to talk before the song changed over. It was literally a quick bro hug and handshake with them before I went back to the stage. Two days later on St Patricks Day, they became the epicentre of the COVID-19 cluster at the Redoubt Bar in Matamata.”

Hamuera didn’t realise he’d caught COVID-19 during their brief exchange. The symptoms weren’t immediately apparent and were mistaken for an ear infection. Born with hepatitis B and blocked lungs, Hamuera suffered from bronchial and sinus issues his whole life. When he started to feel unwell, he put it down to one of his many underlying conditions.

“I had an ear infection from diving, which masked the COVID-19,” says Hamuera. “At the time, we were in a lockdown and I was recovering at home. It wasn’t until I spoke to another mate that I found out about the Matamata cluster.”

Hamuera got tested two weeks after meeting his friends at the bar and was found positive for the Delta variant of COVID-19. The news came as a shock.

“I felt angry and disappointed, and was looking for someone to blame,” he says. “My family and mokopuna were in lockdown with me and I was worried about passing it on to them.”

Of his 54 close contacts, which included three aunties with stages 2 to 4 cancer, only Hamuera’s wife, two daughters, son-in-law and mokopuna displayed symptoms.

“Remember that I didn’t know I had the virus till 14 days later so we had no social distancing in the house,” says Hamuera. “My family only had minor symptoms of what I had—loss of taste and smell, diarrhoea and lethargy for a couple of days. It didn’t really affect them.”

Despite being vulnerable to infections and unvaccinated, Hamuera recovered surprisingly quickly and was on the mend when he tested positive. Instead of suffering the debilitating effects of COVID-19, he says his health has actually improved.

“I’ve been participating in a study with Auckland University to find out why my body’s immunity responded the way it did,” says Hamuera. “I put it down to eating wholesome foods and fruit during my illness.”

Hamuera agreed to take part in the “Impacts of COVID-19 in Aotearoa—Ngā Kawekawe o Mate Korona” study in the hopes that other survivors will share their experiences.

“A lot of people who contracted the virus in the Matamata cluster last year don’t want to talk about it because they’re business owners,” says Hamuera. “A lot of fear has been put into coming forward, but it doesn’t bother me and I’m a fencing contractor. I hope they’ll build up the courage to be part of it. The researchers are trying to look into what’s needed for us.”

Although his recovery has been remarkable, Hamuera has joined a support group for COVID-19 survivors suffering long after-effects.

“I feel sorry for them because they’ve had their virus and they’re still having those symptoms,” says Hamuera. “It’s been ongoing for them, whereas that’s not the case for me. It’s going to give us a community to talk to and to be able to reach out to one another.”

About the study

The “Impacts of COVID-19 in Aotearoa—Ngā Kawekawe o Mate Korona” study aims to understand the experiences of people who have had COVID-19. Researchers want to know about the impact COVID-19 has had on the health and well-being of these individuals and their whānau.

If you’re aged 16 and over, and had COVID-19 before 1 December 2021, you’re invited to take part in the study by completing the surveys at <https://covid.aotearoa.com>. Alternatively, you can call **0800 800 581** or email covid.aotearoa@vuw.ac.nz.

The study is led by Dr Lynne Russell (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne, Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Porou) and Dr Mona Jeffreys at Te Hikuwai Rangahau Hauora—Health Services Research Centre at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington.

They head-up a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, primarily from Te Hikuwai Rangahau Hauora—Health Services Research Centre. Dr Marianna Churchward (Lotofaga, Faleasiu, Samoa) leads the Pacific arm of the research.

For more information, contact [Dr Lynne Russell](mailto:lynne.russell@vuw.ac.nz) on lynne.russell@vuw.ac.nz or 022 359 8212, or [Dr Mona Jeffreys](mailto:mona.jeffreys@vuw.ac.nz) on mona.jeffreys@vuw.ac.nz or 027 418 7455.