Covid-19 Part 2: A Lot Happened But What Will Change?

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Much has been written about the Covid 19 pandemic over the past four years. The broad details have been documented across a range of disciplines, from medicine through to the social sciences. While the pandemic created a worldwide disruption, there were also significant regional differences in terms of how the health crisis was handled and the effects on business and society.

As mentioned in our previous Special Issue on this topic [Here], Aotearoa New Zealand presented a relatively unique context as one of a small number of jurisdictions which explicitly adopted an elimination approach to managing population health. While other regions had periods of extended lockdowns or 'stay at home orders', much of New Zealand only experienced one very 'short sharp' lockdown period, then a return to relatively normal public activity. By 2021, reports indicated that New Zealand had the lowest cumulative COVID-19 death rate in the OECD. In addition, the country was reported as being among the top performing regions in terms of impacts on GDP and employment (Baker et al., 2023; Wilson et al, 2021).

There were also temporal differences, with multiple phases of the Covid-19 story. The first phase was perhaps the initial urgency and extreme measures that commenced during 2020. From there, the pandemic progressed on to a second phase with the general loosening of restrictions and the start of the emergence of a 'new post-pandemic normal'. A third phase developed as the direct constraints of the pandemic faded out and the world moved into an international economic recession, while the longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to become evident.

Our earlier Special Issue addressed the challenges that occurred in the early days of the pandemic. This second Special Issue looks at other topics and aspects that only occurred with later scholarship and research. The articles make valuable contributions to the wider international literature. At the same time, they capture detail of the context-specific ways in which the issues played out in the relatively unique New Zealand setting.

A recurring pattern throughout the articles is the ways in which existing systems and patterns interacted with the new situations created by the pandemic. Rather than acting as an opportunity where change and improvement would occur though, in a number of ways, the responses to the pandemic perpetuated patterns of disadvantage.

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As Nicolls, Haar and Wallis highlight, in the early stages of the pandemic, many New Zealand workers experienced increased stresses and demands from factors such as social isolation, cognitive drain from work-home interference while working from home, and increased workloads (Haar, 2021). At the same time there were also gains in some areas, with some employees reporting greater flexibility and autonomy and associated productivity.

The first set of articles in this Issue add to our knowledge with a range of perspectives on the conditions of workers in the pandemic setting.

Fiona Hurd, Katherine Ravenswood and Amber Nicholson explore the experiences of community support workers delivering home-based care during the pandemic. Their research analyses the ways in which workplace health and safety (WHS) deteriorated for these workers during the public health crisis. The workers' concerns were often silenced at multiple levels. In some instances, workers actively sought ways to voice their issues, individually and collectively, through activating employee voice mechanisms. Despite this, the study identifies how a range of macro factors, including workplace and societal conditions, interacted in such a way that the workers' messages were not received. The study echoes recurring themes of how community support represents an example of a highly feminised occupation, based in care work, which is undervalued and deemed as insignificant, unskilled work, where a set of factors combine to the erode workplace health and safety.

Gendered inequalities were not limited to community support workers. **Annick Masselot and Julia Gunn** draw attention to systemic issues involved with gender and inequalities, on a broader level. Building from earlier work in the first phases of the pandemic, they go on to analyse subsequent developments, including the lingering impact of the pandemic on women's employment rights and practices in Aotearoa. They demonstrate how the gender inequalities gap has grown as a result of the pandemic and the policies implemented. Once more, Māori and Pasifika are particularly affected. The authors highlight how disasters and crises such as the pandemic, present opportunities to move from what they term 'gender blind' policymaking, to a new approach that that creates law and policies that support gender equality.

Ceara Nicolls, Jarrod Haar and Amanda Wallis explore the increased job demands that many workers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) posits that job resources can buffer the detrimental effects of job demands, this had not been tested in the context of the widespread disruptions of a pandemic in New Zealand. This left unanswered questions as to whether the nature or scale of those large pandemic-demands were perhaps not as easily buffered with existing resources. Their findings indicate that the increased job demands were indeed detrimental for the domains of employee flourishing and turnover intentions. However, their finding also suggest that in a pandemic, job resources, and particularly psychosocial resources, may be especially relevant for buffering the negative effects of the heightened demands. As we move into a 'new normal' with ongoing political and economic disruptions, those buffering elements are likely to continue to be of importance.

Karin Lasthuizen and Grant Michelson's research note also addresses factors that influence employee wellbeing. Their research focuses on workplace ethics, utilising a nationwide survey of Aotearoa New Zealand employees conducted during the pandemic, along with similar data from 11 other countries, gathered at that same time. Their findings suggest that New Zealand ethical leadership lagged behind Australia, with indicators of workplace misconduct that included bullying and harassment, discrimination, and abuse of managerial authority. Ethical leadership with strong ethical climates and workplace cultures can make a significant contribution to wellbeing, however when employees are unable to speak up and raise concerns about misconduct in the workplace, those negative dynamics can adversely affect their work environment.

Edgar Pacheco adds to the line of studies into working from home over the last decade. The pandemic years saw the sudden shift from discretionary flexible work arrangements to a new situation where that 'flexibility' was transformed into an imposed necessity. His quantitative snapshot from November 2021 looks at the remote working in Aotearoa New Zealand during the middle to later phases of the pandemic.

In the next set of articles, the focus shifts to issues associated with job losses, in a context where large numbers of employees were made redundant or furloughed as a result of the pandemic.

Wayne Macpherson and Doug Ashwell explore the expectations of New Zealand and Australian employees regarding the ways in which they would want their employing organisations to communicate news of redundancy. Dignity and directness emerged as key issues for employees, with workers tending to prefer to receive news of job losses face-to-face from their immediate line manager, senior line manager or CEO, rather than being informed by Human Resources staff.

Peter Skilling focuses on the Covid-19 Income Relief Payment (CIRP) scheme that operated for workers who had lost their jobs in the early phase of the pandemic. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) the article assesses how the 'deservingness' of CIRP recipients was constructed by key actors and was contested by other groups. The people receiving CIRP were afforded a higher level of societal acceptance than other unemployed people and other welfare recipients. CIRP recipients who were made unemployed by the pandemic were largely seen as deserving of support, whereas the long-term unemployed and other welfare recipients were viewed as less deserving. These findings echo Australian commentaries (Klein, 2020), and they have implications for benefit systems, particularly any future move to revive plans for a Social Unemployment Insurance (SUI) scheme, with the risk of potentially creating a two-tier welfare system.

Finally, two further articles turn our attention to employment law issues that emerged during the pandemic, along with the operation of one of the specialist employment institutions during that era.

Amanda Reilly analyses some of the key employment law developments related to Covid-19. This was a period of disruptions to the established order, affecting workers and workplaces, and raising a variety of issues that included questions around payment, wage subsidies and workforce reductions, as well as the contentious issues associated with vaccination requirements. The article identifies the ways in which core principles of the regulatory framework endured in the pandemic setting, with an overriding commitment to the good faith obligation and the requirements that employers and employees consult and engage with each other, even in the face of a public health catastrophe.

Andrew Dallas, Chief of the Employment Relations Authority, writes as a participant/observer considering how the Authority responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, and what lessons might be learned. Describing it as a nimble and procedurally lean tribunal, the article outlines how the Authority was able to continue investigating employment relationship problems in-person for significant periods during the pandemic and was able to minimise delays for parties seeking assistance. The article also looks beyond the pandemic, to consider the the future roles of the Authority in an era of political, technological and economic change.

In sum, these articles capture a range of important issues from the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. While much has indeed been written already, these articles provide valuable additions to that body of knowledge.

At the same time, these Special Issue articles do not provide a complete picture; they often point to gaps that need further investigation. There is a particular need for further research regarding the longer term, downstream effects of the pandemic. A range of policy interventions and actions by other key stakeholders in the employment arena may well prove to have unintended consequences that only become evident later.

The many important insights from this research, along with other future work, can then provide valuable guidance to inform future responses to crisis situations. The question then will be the extent to which policymakers invest by understanding and using this growing knowledge in order to plan and prepare for inevitable disruptions that will occur.

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