



Western Bay of Plenty  
Primary Health Organisation

TŪNGIA TE URURUA KIA TUPU  
WHAKARITORITO TE TUPU  
O TE HARAKEKE

# Te Rerenga

NEWSLETTER | MARCH 2026

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## A new chapter for WBOP PHO

### Sarah Stevenson confirmed as Chief Executive as the organisation settles into its new whare at The Collective.

The Western Bay of Plenty Primary Health Organisation (WBOP PHO) Board confirmed the appointment of Sarah Stevenson as Chief Executive on

10 March. Her appointment comes at a significant moment. Earlier in February, the organisation moved into its new whare at The Collective on Seventeenth Avenue in Tauranga, marking the beginning of a new phase for the team.

Sarah has served in the interim role over the past three months, guiding WBOP PHO through a period of change

while continuing to strengthen relationships with general practices, iwi partners and community providers across the rohe.

The decision was formally shared with staff during the organisation's monthly hui. During the announcement, WBOP PHO Co-chair Paora Stanley acknowledged the strong leadership Sarah has shown and the confidence the Board has in her appointment.

"The Board is certain she is the right person to lead WBOP PHO at this time and provide the continuity, stability and direction we need as we continue strengthening locally-led primary care and improving outcomes for our communities," he said.

Reflecting on her appointment, Sarah said her focus is on building on the progress made and continuing to support general practices, iwi partners and communities across the Bay of Plenty. "It has been a period of change, and I am proud of how our people have continued to show up for our communities. My priority now is to keep working alongside our providers and wider sector so services respond to the needs of whānau across the rohe."

On the following pages, we share more about the move to The Collective and what it means for our teams, alongside an interview with Sarah about her journey to this role and the priorities guiding WBOP PHO in this next phase.



– WBOP PHO kaimahi outside The Collective on Seventeenth Avenue.

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A new chapter for WBOP PHO – continued

INTERVIEW

# Sarah Stevenson on leading WBOP PHO



New Chief Executive Sarah Stevenson stepped into the role on 10 March after a three-month interim period. She has been with the organisation since May 2024 as General Manager Community Services. In this interview, she reflects on her journey to the role, the values guiding her leadership and the priorities shaping WBOP PHO's next phase.

## 1. What did you learn as interim Chief Executive that will shape your approach in the role going forward?

Over the past three months, I've had the opportunity to work closely with our teams, our general practices, iwi and community partners across Te Moana a Toi Bay of Plenty. What has really stood out to me is the strength of the relationships in our network and people's commitment to supporting our communities.

Being a locally based organisation also means we can respond quickly when our community needs us. We saw that recently following the tragic events in Mauao and in Pāpāmoa/Welch Bay, where practices, community providers and support services came together very quickly to care for those affected.

That experience reinforced for me the importance of strong local connections. My approach going forward will continue to focus on listening to our providers, supporting collaboration across the network and ensuring we are enabling the frontline of primary care to respond to the needs of our community.

## 2. What are your key priorities for WBOP PHO over the next year?

Our focus over the next 12 months is on strengthening primary care and ensuring practices and community providers are well supported in a very challenging health environment.

Primary care is the first point of contact with the health system for most people. Our general practice teams see patients across their whole lives, building trusted relationships and understanding their health over time. That continuity of care is incredibly important, which is why supporting our practice teams, so they can do their jobs well, is a key priority.

Over the next 12 months we will also be working with our practices as the health system introduces a new target for people to see their primary care team within a week. Supporting practices to meet that expectation while maintaining quality care will be an important focus.

We remain focused on improving equity of outcomes for Māori and priority populations, while making sure we are using resources wisely and delivering services that genuinely make a difference for our communities.

## 3. How will WBOP PHO support and work with its network?

The strength of the Bay of Plenty health system lies in the partnerships between general practice, iwi and community providers. Each brings unique knowledge and expertise about the communities they serve.

Our role as a Primary Health Organisation is to help bring those partners together, support collaboration and make sure services are coordinated around the needs of whānau. That means continuing to listen to our providers, backing locally led solutions, and ensuring that our programmes and investments support the work already happening in communities.

## 4. You grew up in Tauranga and have worked internationally. How do those experiences shape

## the way you approach improving health outcomes for communities here in the Bay of Plenty?

I come from several generations of Tauranga-born ancestors and was born and raised here myself, so this community is deeply personal to me. I care about the wellbeing of the people who live here and about building a health system that supports future generations.

Having worked in Australia and United Kingdom has given me exposure to different health systems and ways of thinking about prevention, community care and innovation. What that has reinforced for me is the importance of strong local leadership and solutions that are designed with communities, not imposed from elsewhere.

For the Bay of Plenty, that means building on the strengths we already have in our providers, iwi partnerships and community networks.

## 5. What opportunities do you see for strengthening locally-led primary care and improving outcomes for whānau?

Primary care plays a critical role in the health of our communities, and there is a real opportunity to continue strengthening locally led models of care.

Technology and innovation will also play an important role. Whether that's creating efficiencies to help manage busy clinics, digital access to services, using data and technology to support more proactive care or enabling new ways for people to connect with their healthcare team, there are real opportunities to make primary care more accessible and responsive.

Ultimately our goal is to ensure people can access the right care, in the right place, at the right time while our health system continues to evolve in ways that work for the communities we serve.

A new chapter for WBOP PHO – continued

# A new whare to support local care

The WBOP PHO moved to The Kollektive at 145 Seventeenth Avenue, Tauranga, in February 2026. The new base places the organisation within Aotearoa's largest co-working space dedicated to social impact, only a few minutes from its previous location on First Avenue.

The new whare represents more than a change of address. Chief Executive

Sarah Stevenson says the move supports stronger connections with community partners while enabling a more practical way of working.

“The space gives us a leaner, more flexible operating model, while keeping us close to the people and organisations we work alongside. We are a locally led, GP and iwi-owned PHO. Our mahi is

grounded in strong local relationships. Being based in a community hub reflects that and supports the way we coordinate, support and deliver services across our rohe.”

The Kollektive brings together not-for-profit, charitable and social enterprise organisations under one roof. The space was designed to encourage shared learning, practical collaboration and community connections. Its focus on social impact and sustainability aligns with WBOP PHO kaupapa and values, including our commitment to equity and community wellbeing.



– WBOP PHO new whare in Tauranga. Photo: The Kollektive.

## Find us

Our contact details remain the same. As we are based within a shared space, visitors can check in at The Kollektive's reception, and a member of our team will meet them. Visitor parking is available on site, with additional street parking on Seventeenth Avenue. ▲

## Kiri's Kōrero

### **Kollektive Kotahitanga**

*Settling into a new space while staying grounded in the values that connect our primary care community.*

Over the past few weeks, we have been settling into our new home at The Kollektive. Like any move, there has been a bit of adjusting. We have been learning the rhythms of the space and discovering the local talent in art (and kai!) at the Historic Village.

A new space also gives us the opportunity to pause, reset and reconnect with what grounds us.

It is fair to say the past few months have been challenging across primary

care. General practice teams, nurses, receptionists and community providers have all been navigating change, pressure and increasing demand. Through it all, the strength of our sector has always been our ability to support one another and stay focused on the wellbeing of the communities we serve.

That is why moving into The Kollektive feels fitting.

### **Values that connect our work**

At its heart, The Kollektive is built on values of manaakitanga, generosity, mutual respect and collaboration. These values uplift one another and encourage each other's mana through the way we work together. They also reflect the principle of kotahitanga, unity and collective purpose.

In many ways, these same values are already present every day in general practice.

They are present in the way reception teams welcome whānau with a friendly

‘Kia ora!’ through the door, how nurses walk alongside patients through complex journeys and how practice teams quietly support one another through busy clinic days.

The Kollektive reminds us that when people and organisations come together, sharing knowledge, supporting each other and working collaboratively, we strengthen the care we provide to our communities.

**Whatever changes lie ahead, staying grounded in kotahitanga and shared purpose will help ensure we continue to support each other and the whānau we care for.**

When we stay anchored in manaakitanga, generosity and kotahitanga, we move through change together with confidence. *He waka eke noa!*

Ngā mihi.

**Kiri Peita – General Manager:**  
*Māori, Population Health & Equity.*



# “Saying yes changed my life”



## A personal story of support through BeingWell, WBOP PHO's free mental health and wellbeing service, and how it helped someone move forward.

Stella was referred to BeingWell, WBOP PHO's free mental health and wellbeing service, through her general practice team in June 2025. To protect her privacy, we are not using her real name and have chosen not to name her Health Coach or medical centre.

She was living with long-term health concerns that were starting to affect her daily life. She felt overwhelmed and unsure what support would look like, but she chose to say yes. What follows is her story, shared with permission.

### A wake-up call

Around June last year, I went for my routine yearly check-up. I knew my health was not ideal, but I was in denial about how bad it was.

My blood results gave me a big fright. My cholesterol was too high. My blood pressure was high. I was one point away from pre-diabetes. These conditions run strongly in my family. I have seen them take lives and change lives of my loved ones. Still, I kept telling myself I was fine.

To be completely honest, I had been slowly harming my health with food and lack of movement for over five years. It was never just one biscuit or a few chips. My moods dictated what I ate and when. Happy? I ate. Sad? I ate. Bored? I ate more. I was always pushing past that “off switch” that everyone around me seemed to have.

Binge eating constantly, feeling depressed about it, crash dieting, punishing myself with exercise and then binge eating again was my entire life.

My weight had climbed to over 140kg, with no signs of slowing down.

Everything hurt. I had no energy but could never get enough sleep. I neglected things that needed to be done because I just could not do them. Even grocery shopping was exhausting. My body hurt for hours afterwards. I was always out of breath.

Sadly, I had become very good at hiding it from my partner and denying it to myself. It is only now that I can really see how bad things had become.

Then I was asked if I wanted to be referred to a BeingWell Health Coach. The best thing I have ever done for myself was say YES.

### A way out

Not knowing what to expect was scary. I wondered if I would be judged. I wondered if she would understand what it was like to live in a body like mine. I wondered what she could do for me that I had not already tried before.

The connection was instant. She was incredibly warm, cared deeply and was not afraid to ask hard questions. With her help, I soon realised that I did not want to spend the rest of my life living this way. My family deserves a healthy, happy mum and wife. But most of all, I deserve that too.

Our weekly check-ins quickly became the highlight of my week. I felt that someone finally saw me. I felt that maybe, just maybe, there was a way out of this.

We went back to basics and focused on learning how to eat properly again. I always left with information I could refer to later. Those resources soon took pride of place on our fridge and in our kitchen, opening up honest conversations with my family that were long overdue.

There was no more searching for fast ways to dump weight and no more horrendous crash dieting. We also set

simple goals around gently becoming more active, and I jumped into it with both feet.

### A body screaming for help

Being encouraged to join a walking group was a massive turning point for me. Not once did I feel forced or judged. I felt welcomed straight away.

Then came the day that changed everything for me. Nothing opens your eyes to your health like almost passing out on a simple walk around the park. My body was screaming for help, and I had completely missed the warning signs. I have never been as scared about my health as I was that day.

From that point on, I became a regular on group walks and also started walking daily on my own. I went from struggling with one to two-kilometre walks to comfortably walking eight kilometres with my partner and our dog.

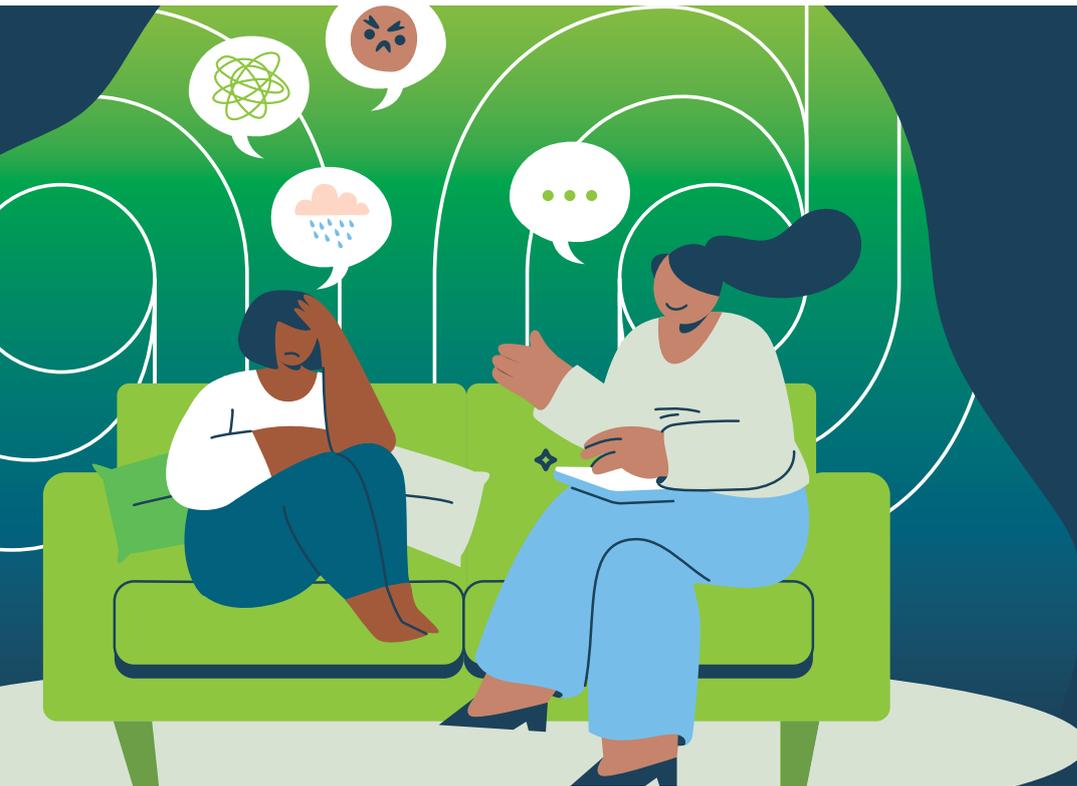
### Sustainable choices

My weight started to come off as a result of the hard work, and it became easier to move my body. Removing the “I have to lose weight” mindset and changing it to “I want to be healthy” made everything feel different this time.

Saying YES to new things became much easier. I started attending the coffee group and even Aqua Fit classes. My confidence has grown so much, and my desire to get out and live my life has returned in ways I never thought possible.

I am always reminded that the changes I am making need to be sustainable, because they are choices I will need to keep making for the rest of my life.

The support I receive continues to help me set and reach realistic goals. Eight weeks ago, I said YES to the gym. This was well outside my comfort zone, but stepping into it has been incredible.



*"I am always reminded that the changes I am making need to be sustainable, because they are choices I will need to keep making for the rest of my life."*

## Having my life back

The gym has become my haven four to five times a week, for up to two hours at a time. My mental health has benefited as well, and I have found a new emotional strength there. Where food used to be how I managed my feelings, the gym has given me a healthier way to do that.

The battle with food is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. But my love for the gym, and the peace it brings to my mind, continues to outweigh that struggle. Seeing my body lift, bend, carry and grow stronger has been the most empowering experience. I feel like I have my life back, and it is better than I ever hoped for.

Around the time of my first appointment, I set three goals for myself. To fit into size 18 clothes by Christmas, to be able to run with my three-year-old granddaughter and to climb Mount Maunganui. That last goal was one I never truly believed would be possible.

My most recent weigh-in showed my weight had dropped from just over 140kg to 116kg, and my clothing size had changed from 24–26 to size 18. Running with my granddaughter is now easier, faster, and far less painful. She loves that her grandma is more active and is always keen to go swimming with me at the beach.

## Once out of reach

Climbing to the summit of Mount Maunganui, well before December even started, was my biggest achievement of 2025. While I often tease my health coach about “cracking the whip” and pushing me up there, I am endlessly grateful for her seeing through all my excuses and roadblocks, and quite literally climbing that mountain with me.

In my mind, I had already decided that making it halfway would be enough. My health coach would not let that happen, and it was exactly what I needed. The gentle encouragement, counting stairs, lots of laughter and me leaning on trees to catch my breath are such special memories that I am proud to share.

At the top, she gave me space and privacy while I cried like a baby. It still has not sunk in that I did it. I am now looking forward to heading up again as my fitness improves, so I can take it all in rather than complain the whole way up.

## A brighter future

I genuinely feel I have gained a life-long friend through this journey. Someone who holds me accountable, helps me set realistic goals, listens when I cry, laughs with me and supports me every step of the way.

After talking with others who have shared this space with me, there is no doubt that lives are being changed one session at a time. I honestly do not know where I would be today without this support.

2026 is looking brighter than ever.

For the first time in a very long time, I am excited about what lies ahead.

The work is not finished yet. My weight is still higher than it should be, my cholesterol needs to improve and I want to come off blood pressure medication. But it no longer feels overwhelming. Little by little, one step in front of the other, I am reclaiming my life, and I am well on my way.

## Taking the first step with BeingWell

BeingWell supports people to take small, realistic steps towards better mental health and wellbeing. The service is free. You can contact the team directly. You do not need a referral from your doctor to get started. There is no judgement. There is no pressure to be ready.

**If this story feels familiar, you can learn more and connect with us at [wboppho.org.nz/beingwell](http://wboppho.org.nz/beingwell) ▲**

# Inside BeingWell HIP training

**One of the professionals supporting community mental health and wellbeing through our BeingWell service is called a Health Improvement Practitioner. It is a long name, so most people know them as HIPs.**

The role began in New Zealand in 2017 and is still new to many. In the Bay of Plenty, more people have become familiar with HIPs through the care they provide in general practice. But do you know what it takes to become a HIP?

HIPs are already qualified and registered health professionals before they enter the role. They also need at least three years of experience, usually in mental health, and training in talking therapies. Many come from backgrounds such as social work, psychology, mental health nursing or occupational therapy. HIPs begin working in general practice while they train to be endorsed, with supervision and support built in from the start.

**Morgan Hill, an endorsed HIP working at BeingWell, describes how the training works:**

“We start with a week of intensive training. This focuses on the HIP role, the model of care, and how to become part of general practice. After that, we are supported for six to nine months by a dedicated trainer. They meet with us regularly, observe our

work in practice, and are available for questions. We have three assessments during this period. We also connect with other HIPs in training, sharing learning and support as we grow into the role.”

**For Helen Duyvestyn, also an endorsed BeingWell HIP, the training is key to the care people receive:**

“Our training is based on Focused Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (FACT), a model of brief psychological therapy to help people manage any difficulties they may be facing. The assessments focus on how we work with people in real situations. Are we following

the model? Are we staying person-led? What can we improve? The training builds on our existing experience and gives us a clear structure to use our skills well. It supports safe, consistent care and helps us work confidently alongside GPs and practice teams.”

All of this means that when someone sees a HIP through BeingWell, they are seeing someone who is already qualified, has trained specifically for this role and has had their work observed in real practice. This careful approach also reflects how WBOP PHO support their teams and why people can feel confident in the care and wellbeing support available to them in the Bay of Plenty.



## **WBOP PHO AT THE MHAS ADVISORY GROUP**

Odette Geldenhuys, BeingWell Service Lead, has joined the Mental Health and Addiction Services (MHAS) Advisory Group for the Bay of Plenty, led by Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora.

This group focuses on improving how people access and enter adult mental health and addiction

services across the region. Its work includes reviewing intake, triage and referral processes, with the aim of making pathways clearer, more consistent and better connected with primary and community care.

This important piece of work brings together secondary services, primary care and community voices to co-design improvements that better support tangata whaiora and the workforce. Odette's involvement ensures our local PHO and community perspective is at the table.



## **Our voice on the national Primary Care Health Target Advisory Group**

General Manager for Network & Clinical Services, Wendy Dillon, is representing WBOP PHO on the national Primary Care Health Target Advisory Group, ensuring the views of our local practices and our organisation are reflected in national decisions.

This group is shaping the new Primary Care Health Target and the National Primary Care Dataset. The work focuses on timely access to care, quality, equity and patient experience, including the proposed target for people to see a general practice provider within one week. ▲

# A lifetime in nursing

From Waikato Hospital and a small clinic in Arataki to modern general practice, Julie Cowley reflects on almost 50 years of care.



After nearly five decades in nursing, including more than 44 years in primary care, Julie Cowley has retired from general practice at the end of last year. Her legacy reaches far beyond the walls of any one clinic.

Julie began her career in hospital nursing after she trained at Waikato Hospital in 1978. What followed was a journey shaped by curiosity, commitment and a strong belief in the value of relationships in healthcare.

She moved into primary care in 1981, driven by a desire to help prevent illness rather than only treat it after harm had occurred. "We're just at the bottom of the cliff there," she said, reflecting on her hospital years.

## Early days in primary care

Julie joined Arataki Clinic, a small solo GP clinic on the corner of Korowai Street and Girven Road in Mount Maunganui. Primary care looked very different then. She worked as both practice nurse and receptionist.



– Julie's graduation, 1978. Photo: Supplied.

From that first clinic onwards, Julie never had to look for another job. As the practice expanded and changed ownership over the years, she remained part of the team. She worked across six different buildings and under four different owners as the practice grew into Bayfair Doctors, Pāpāmoa Doctors, and later The Doctors Bayfair and The Doctors Pāpāmoa.

## A career that kept evolving

Over the years, Julie built a broad and respected career that included roles as a practice nurse, nurse manager, diabetes nurse specialist, respiratory device trainer and accreditation assessor. She also served on the WBOP PHO Clinical Committee in its early years, bringing a nursing voice to the table at a time when that was far less common.

Looking back, she says the biggest shift in primary care has been the expansion of the nursing role. "What's changed the most is the shifting of care and services from a GP to nurses," she said. "Those opportunities have evolved from that, and you've needed to upskill to learn new things."

She welcomed that change. She completed further study including a Bachelor of Nursing, postgraduate training in asthma and COPD care, practice nurse accreditation, a Master of Nursing with pharmacology and advanced diabetes, nurse prescriber training and Foundation Standards assessor training.

She describes curiosity as one of the main forces behind her career. "If I don't know something, I will find out," she said.

## The heart of the work

Julie's contribution to nursing was recognised through several awards. Yet when asked what mattered most, her answer always returns to the same place: people.

"The thing that I enjoy most, and that I've still held on to, is my one-on-one consultations with the patient," she said. "Being able to provide them with what they need and for them to walk out the door feeling happy and knowing a bit more than what they did before. That's my best."

Working in the same community for many years meant caring for several generations of families. Julie spoke warmly about seeing children grow up, then later caring for them as adults, and even working alongside people she had once vaccinated as children. For Julie, this continuity is what makes primary care special.

"It's a relationship."

*"The thing that I enjoy most, and that I've still held on to, is my one-on-one consultations with the patient."*

## A lasting contribution

Even in retirement, Julie is not stepping away from nursing altogether. She plans to continue some work as a Foundation Standards assessor for the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners, supporting practices through quality processes and sharing her knowledge across the sector.

She is also preparing for a new chapter that includes caring for her husband, reconnecting with family and friends, travelling around Aotearoa, and making time for the many crafts she has collected over the years. ▲

# Connecting Māori health leaders

WBOP PHO's General Manager Māori, Population Health & Equity, Kiri Peita, recently joined fellow Māori health leaders at the Ngā Matapihi o te Wairua rōpū wānanga hosted by Pinnacle Health in Kirikiriroa Hamilton.

Ngā Matapihi o te Wairua is a General Practice New Zealand (GPNZ) member rōpū that brings together Māori leaders working across primary care to address equity challenges, particularly for Māori. Kiri co-chairs the rōpū alongside Michaela Kamo, Director Māori Health at Pegasus Health.



— Ngā Matapihi o te Wairua rōpū.  
Image: Pinnacle Health.

The two-day wānanga opened on 26 February with a mihi whakatau at Pinnacle's office. In his whaikōrero, Pinnacle Health Chief Executive Justin Butcher reflected on the importance of unity in the current environment.

"The value in working together as PHOs and as Māori leaders helps to ensure that collectively we continue to focus on equity, regardless of the political environment, because we believe it's the right thing to do. In this time of some uncertainty, we have an opportunity to remind our networks of the value and support we provide them with," he said.

Reflecting on the kaupapa and the ongoing mahi of the rōpū, Kiri noted the importance of creating wānanga-led spaces where Māori leaders can connect, uplift one another and strengthen leadership across PHOs. "These gatherings support shared learning and draw on regional exemplars and mātauranga-ā-rōhe, helping keep the work grounded in the communities it serves," she noted.



— Kiri (L) and Michaela (R).  
Image: Pinnacle Health.

A highlight of the hui was the presentation of a taonga named for the rōpū, Ngā Matapihi o te Wairua. Generously sponsored by GPNZ, the taonga will be passed from host to host, carrying the mauri of the rōpū and symbolising shared purpose and enduring leadership.

Participants also experienced a Waka Ama voyage along the Waikato Awa to Tūrangawaewae Marae, deepening understanding of the rohe and its history. A visit to Taakiri Tuu at Te Kōhao Health showcased kaupapa Māori in action, and guest speaker Shelley Campbell, CEO of Wise Group, shared further insights with the rōpū.

## Local response informs national discussion

WBOP PHO's response to the severe weather events in the Bay of Plenty in January 2026, including the tragedy at Mauao, is now informing national conversations about the role of primary care in emergencies. The experience has been included as a case study in General Practice New Zealand's (GPNZ) submission on the Emergency Management Bill, which calls for formal recognition of primary care as system-critical infrastructure during emergency response.

### On the ground

WBOP PHO activated its response within 30 minutes of the first identified need.

Teams mobilised psychosocial support, including Integrated Primary Mental Health and Addiction (IPMHA) services, and worked with local partners to support people in distress. At the same time, urgent care providers prepared to receive patients directly from the Emergency Department. General practice teams organised extra staff to support both physical and mental health needs.

In the days that followed, WBOP PHO worked with the Te Whatu Ora Health NZ Emergency Response Lead, iwi and hapū, local councils, New Zealand Police and community organisations. This ensured a coordinated and culturally responsive

response. GPs also provided care for whānau waiting within the cordon area. WBOP PHO continued to support the community through the recovery phase, coordinating IPMHA services, general practice and urgent care to respond to ongoing needs.

Scan the QR code to view GPNZ Submission



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