

LOCKDOWN LOSSES

MOURNING FROM AFAR

We must improve how we manage death and dying during pandemics, say those denied the most important moments of their lives. **by SARAH CATHERALL • photograph by REBEKAH ROBINSON**

In February this year, Andrew Barclay sat in an MIQ hotel room in Christchurch, exhausted from travelling more than 18,000km from the other side of the world. He had come so far, but he was all too aware that his journey wasn't yet over. His mother, Frances Anne Elliot, lay dying just 4km away.

It had taken Barclay, an operations manager based in London, about 15 months just to get to this point, battling what he describes as maddening MIQ bureaucracy. A Kiwi citizen, he hadn't been home since 2015, but he was desperate to return to see his ailing 75-year-old mother.

He knew her health had deteriorated after he got on the plane, and he begged officials to allow him an early release from his hotel room. But he was too late. On February 20 – at a time when there were 2522 new daily community cases of Omicron – his mother passed away while Barclay was still busy filling out forms.

Two days later, triple-jabbed Barclay was told the “good news” that he could leave MIQ and self-isolate for a further three days at his mother's home. He had lived there with her as a university student, but this time he was there to prepare her funeral.

Her glass of water was still on the kitchen table, and her gardening gloves were lying on the lawn, near the roses he had intended to clip with her. “My sister and her kids waved at me from the roadside because I was self-isolating. It was dreadful. The house was silent. Mum should have been cheering my arrival with arms outstretched. It had

all gone so terribly wrong. This was when I really broke down,” he says.

Barclay's story is like many that have punctuated the lobby group Grounded Kiwis' social media feed – stories of expat Kiwis who remain traumatised after being unable to be with dying relatives, or farewell them at funerals; of family members being unable to get in or out of the country to see their loved ones in tragic circumstances.

For more than two years, Covid has touched everyone, but it was the heartbreak-

“My daughters were beside themselves. It was devastating. Some of the decisions were inhumane.”

ing situations around death and mourning that have left some of the deepest scars.

During level 4 lockdowns, Kiwis who passed away were denied funerals. Funeral directors have calculated that almost 5000 funerals did not take place – because of the seven-week total of national lockdowns and the extra weeks that Auckland was at level 4.

Even during level 3, families were often forced to watch loved ones being laid to rest via a video feed because funeral and tangi numbers were limited to just 10 people. And many remain deeply upset at what they say were inhumane rules around visiting the elderly and infirm.

“NONSENSICAL RULES”

It was during Auckland's level 4 lockdown in September that Tim Gordon decided to get out of the house with his wife, Angela.

“We had been locked up and I suggested we head out for a drive. We stopped and bought a couple of ice creams. I was tempted to stop and look at the view but we kept going.” It proved to be a fatal decision.

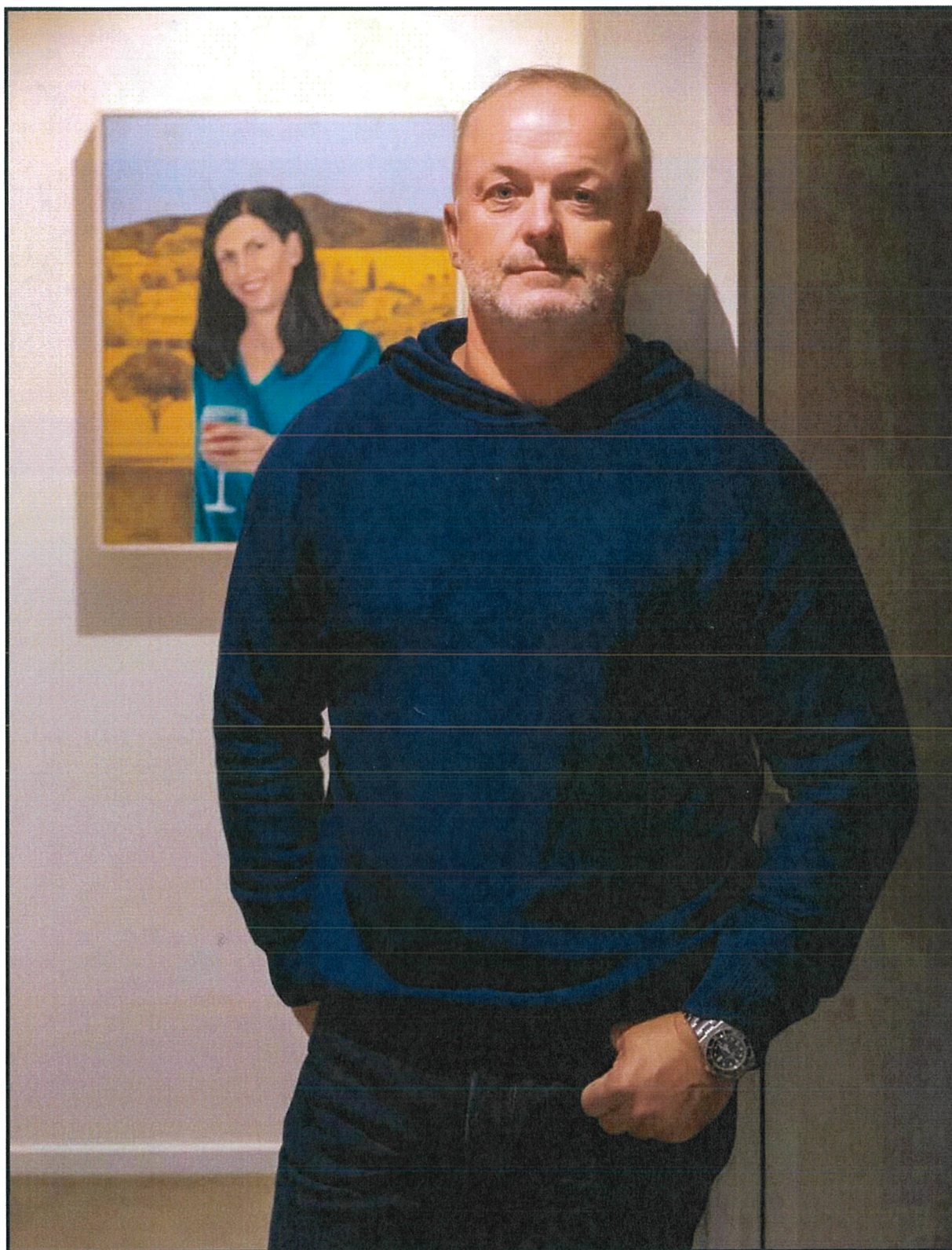
After a car crossed the road's centre line and crashed into them, the business owner spent two days in hospital with concussion and a knee injury. His wife was admitted to intensive care with critical injuries. She was pronounced dead two days later, leaving behind their four children – Joshua, 27, Isabelle, 26, Olivia, 21, and Charlotte, 19.

While she was in ICU, Angela was allowed only one visitor a day, and for a limited time, so her children had to take turns. At night, the staff bent the rules and allowed Gordon to leave his ward and sit by her side.

His daughters were furious, he says. “My daughters were beside themselves. It was devastating. A lot of the rules were nonsensical. Some of the decisions were inhumane. I'm a fellow patient isolated at hospital and I'm supposed to have limited time to see my wife? That's cruel.”

The family were told over the phone – rather than face-to-face – that she had been pronounced dead. Gordon had to plan her funeral, and he kept delaying it in the hope that a change in levels would allow more

Tim Gordon was restricted in the time he could be by his dying wife's bedside in ICU after the couple were in a car crash.



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people to attend. But in the end, he couldn't wait any longer.

"We were holding off, holding off, hoping we could have a reasonable-sized funeral. I'm one of seven kids and my family were all really close to Angela. My four sisters were gutted they couldn't come. Not even my mother could be there. Very close family members couldn't be there to farewell her."

Gordon is angry RAT tests weren't widely available so the rules could have been relaxed sooner.

"I've been angry about a lot of the government's decisions around Covid anyway, but I was grieving and it made the whole experience a whole lot worse. It's easy to close the border. But the protocols around things like sizes of funerals and gatherings were so cruel. Some of the rules were ridiculous: you can have picnics but you can't go to public toilets."

CALLS FOR AN INQUIRY

Critics say New Zealand's border rules and the Covid response were at times cruel, especially from last September, when Kiwis were getting jabbed and the government was using other tools to stop the virus overwhelming the health system. The High Court recently ruled in favour of obby group Grounded Kiwis in its case against the MIQ system, saying the virtual lobby booking lottery did not sufficiently allow individual circumstances to be considered and prioritised where necessary.

The National Party is calling for a royal commission of inquiry, with MP Chris Bishop saying, "It has been two pretty extraordinary years, tens of billions of dollars spent, extreme restrictions unseen since wartime, NZ citizens blocked from coming to their own country.

"I'm not saying those things were good or bad. I think it makes sense at the appropriate juncture [that] we will need to look back and see what the government did, and what

GRIEVING DURING COVID

LEVEL 4 (no funerals allowed) Five weeks March 25-April 27, 2020 – 3150 funerals not held (figures are estimates); Aug 17-Aug 31, 2021 – 1260; plus Auckland to Sept 21 – 550. An estimated total of 4960 funerals not held.

LEVEL 3 (mostly Auckland only – August 2020; Feb 2021; August 2021) Funerals limited to 10 attendees. Many families missed out on being present at a farewell. No travelling between regions for funerals held outside Auckland.

LEVEL 2 (multiple). Limited to 100 attendees. These were initially limited to 10 attendees; the Funeral Directors Association lobbied the government to lift the number to 100.

lessons we can learn for the future.

"There is a recognition that we were too cautious at the border and didn't allow people to be released from MIQ early enough. It's the hardest thing I've had to deal with as an MP, to be honest, especially in the latter half of last year when it was pretty clear that Covid wasn't going to go away."

Waikato University law professor Alexander Gillespie is also calling for a royal commission of inquiry. He notes it is the highest form of official inquiry into matters of public importance – more powerful than a government inquiry. Lessons can therefore be learnt, and recommendations made that can stick, he argues.

Just as we have reviewed the Christchurch mosque shootings and the Whakaari/White Island tragedy, New Zealand needs to consider its approach to

Covid, Gillespie says. "There can be no doubt New Zealand's handling of the pandemic justifies the same attention. The whole country has been turned upside down for two years. It makes sense to say, 'We got this right, we got this wrong!'"

One of the criticisms is that health officials – director-general of health Ashley Bloomfield and public health director Caroline McElnay – advised the government to scrap MIQ back in mid-November. In response to questions from the *Listener*, Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins notes this was initial advice, not final. The extra four months gave the country the chance to get boosted and to get vaccination rates up over 90%, he says. It is too early to consider an inquiry, he adds, "but we have not ruled it out".

Gillespie thinks the government needs to give a more extensive explanation about why it chose to follow some advice, but not all of it. "We know there will be another pandemic," he says. "So what we need to ask is:

was the approach proportionate to the costs incurred by people? Whenever you put restrictions on anyone's liberty, that must always be updated."

Back in the UK with his wife and two children, Barclay is still grieving and questioning the country he once thought of as home. "I'm a mess. It's changed everything. I can't sleep, so I'm on medication – that's how bad I feel."

While New Zealand was spared the high Covid fatalities the UK experienced, Barclay believes New Zealanders suffered in other ways, particularly when a health response overrode what he says is a basic human

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right to be with those we love at the end of their lives. "I'm a victim. All those who had to go through that level of bureaucracy to try to get home are victims. It's not socially normal. We were treated like animals."

PROUD KIWI TO ANGRY KIWI

Julia Pannett had to say goodbye to her dying father, Bryan, on a video call. He was almost 90 when he died in a Wellington Hospital bed on February 17 this year, not long after Pannett, in Sydney, and her sister, Libby, in the UK, told him they loved him via a screen.

Like Barclay, Pannett was also unable to get to New Zealand to see her father because MIQ was full.

"It was that slow realisation that the gates were closed and there was no way we were going to make it home.

"But I could have been there. I felt like, 'Oh, I'm one of those Kiwis who is locked out of my own country.' I went from being a proud Kiwi to a sad Kiwi. I was really angry about that."

Pannett was able to get back for her father's funeral, which was delayed until April. "Some of the stories made horrific reading. Regardless, I still got locked out, our family got locked out and it wasn't a pleasant experience. My view of New Zealand has been tainted."

That's a view shared by many of the expat Kiwis who struggled to get an MIQ spot when a family member was unwell



Left, Andrew Barclay with his mother, Frances, daughter Jessica and baby Kieran. Right, Barclay could not get out of MIQ to farewell his mother.



Bryan Pannett, whose daughter Julia – in turquoise frock next to him at his wife’s funeral – was locked out of the country when he died.

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Elderly & isolated

The Covid pandemic has been a steep learning curve for aged-care homes and hospitals. Like workplaces and schools, they have had to juggle opposing views on restrictions: some families say they are too strict, while others argue they're not doing enough to protect their elderly residents.

Wairarapa great-grandmother Diane Taylor (not her real name) has had a grueling time during Covid. After a series of falls last year, she has been in and out of Wairarapa, Hutt Valley and Wellington hospitals.

At times, only one support person has been allowed to visit her. Thanks to a dip in case numbers, she spent Christmas with her extended family, but this year she was not allowed any visitors for about a month.

"Some days Mum has been just miserable," her daughter Ruth (not her real name) says. "She misses having visits to look forward to; seeing us was the highlight of her day. She asks how much longer 'this lock-out' is going to last."

The family have recently been granted an exemption for two people to visit Taylor. But exemptions cannot be transferred between people, which means one of her children has been shut out. "I haven't told her yet!" Ruth groans.

Although many rest homes have now relaxed the rules, some have not yet returned to normal. Some continue to battle Omicron outbreaks. Some still require visitors to have RAT tests to visit, and some limit visitor numbers and restrict the length of visits.

Nathalie Norris lives in a second-storey apartment at the Bupa Fergusson Retirement Village in Upper Hutt. Her life is mostly back to the pre-Covid "normal", with a key exception. The care home neighbouring her apartment complex is closed to visitors, after more than half its 102 residents contracted the virus. To contain its spread, residents must remain in their rooms where possible and refrain from using communal areas. Organised activities have been cancelled.

Norris misses visiting her friends in the care home and volunteering each lunchtime in the dining room. As we talk, she receives a text from one of those friends. "Any news your side?"

At the end of April, 19 Bupa care homes and villages were closed due to Covid outbreaks, with 3% of its staff and 3% of its residents in isolation. The company says the health and wellbeing of its residents and staff are always its top priority, and it closes its care homes only when residents test positive. It still allows visits on compassionate grounds, on a case-by-case basis.



Aged Care Association chief executive Simon Wallace says aged-care homes insist management of the pandemic has not changed over the past two years. "If anything, it's probably more robust than it was because we've got the benefits of RAT-testing visitors now. Even though Omicron has had more outbreaks, they've been managed through testing."

The payoff has been much lower death rates in aged care than has been seen in many other countries. "But that hasn't come without problems," Wallace acknowledges. "The period between August and December last year when Delta was in Auckland, we had rest homes that weren't allowing families to visit. We had a lot of upset families."

Palliative care and end-of-life visits were allowed even during the worst of the Delta outbreak, he says. "Our rest home managers would make that happen, and largely it did happen. Obviously, when you've got a Covid outbreak in your rest home, that's a bit different and you do have to lock down, but those cases were rare."

He acknowledges, however, there have been mental health impacts on residents "and we are looking at that now".

By Sarah Catherall and Emily McDowall.

or dying, according to Martin Newell, spokesman for Grounded Kiwis. Now based in Melbourne, Newell was living in Hong Kong last year when he tried to get an MIQ place to visit his mother, who had heart issues.

Newell says for every 10 people who tried to get an MIQ spot through the lottery system, only one was successful. The emergency category to get a spot in MIQ for the death of a relative was introduced

"Her emergency allocation applications to get back home to bury her son and organise his funeral were declined."

only late last year. Prior to that, if a relative was likely to die within six months, a person could obtain an emergency allocation – based on a doctor's certificate. But if the relative then died, the person trying to get home was no longer eligible.

Newell says vaccines began to be available from February last year, so the government then had another tool to fight Covid. But the MIQ system was slow to adapt.

"One of our arguments was that from the peak of the Delta outbreak, the risk changed but the border settings didn't. As other countries were starting to get higher vaccination rates and end hotel quarantine, New Zealand failed to act. It caused a lot of heartbreak and unnecessary stress. This was extremely tragic for a number of people we were in touch with who had relatives die suddenly and were unable to get back."

He refers to one case where a woman's only son died without warning and she was stuck in Australia. "Her emergency allocation applications to get back home to bury her son and organise his funeral were declined. She had to watch this on Zoom, which was absolutely heartbreaking."

FUNERALS LOTTERY

Funeral directors talk about the grief when funerals and tangi could not be held, or there were restrictions on the numbers who could attend. "We became the farewellers and the mourners and the caretakers of saying goodbye to people on behalf of their families," says Funeral Directors Association of New



Rachel Benns wants reassurance that if there's another pandemic or Covid variant, funerals will still be allowed to go ahead.

TOO CAUTIOUS?

When Ardern announced the borders would reopen to Australians in time for the April school holidays, she said: "Our strong health response, including the lowest death rate in the OECD over the past two years and

"It made that grief and loss so much tougher. I think this will mentally affect a lot of people who haven't been able to say goodbye."

Zealand president Rachel Benns. Benns manages 11 Auckland funeral homes in the InvoCare group. The association lobbied the government to change the Covid rules a couple of times, such as allowing 100-person funerals under the red light setting rather than the 10 the government proposed. "At level 3, we had families putting names in the hat to decide who could go as a

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way of being fair. It was truly disheartening."

Across the Tasman, throughout its zero-Covid response, Australia still allowed funerals, albeit with restricted numbers. Here, under level 4, people who died could not be given one at all and cemetery gates were closed. "Mourners weren't allowed in. We had a lot of people waiting to try to have a funeral of 10 and sometimes they waited and waited and waited, and they needed to do something," Benns says.

"We often had no indication from the government from one day to the next. A family would decide to have a cremation because they'd waited so long for the levels to change, and Jacinda [Ardern, Prime

Minister] would stand up the next day and say we can have funerals of 10, but by then it was too late. It was just such a lottery. We had no idea from one day to the next."

Funeral directors held FaceTime viewings, and streamed funerals using drones over cemeteries as families watched their loved ones being buried.

While level 4 was the hardest, even level 3 was heartbreaking, with families placing photos on church pews as a substitute for not being there, Benns says. "You had empty chapels with only 10 people there. That's really tough."

Funerals were often put on hold as family overseas tried to get an MIQ spot. Benns argues the funeral rules were too tough, "especially when we had just a few cases and we wouldn't allow people to say goodbye".

"Given we have thousands of Omicron cases now, it doesn't seem right. Weddings are different to funerals. There wasn't a single super-spreader funeral. It made that grief and loss so much tougher. I think this will mentally affect a lot of people who haven't been able to say goodbye."

Trudie Vos, general manager of the Australasian Grief Centre, has a bereavement team helping people whose loved ones died under Covid restrictions.

"Some people we see are feeling guilty that they weren't able to have that person's wishes met at the end of life, that someone couldn't have a funeral or it wasn't the way they hoped for," she says.

our high rates of vaccination, alongside our reputation as a beautiful place to visit, will be an asset in this market."

But over the past two years, was the government too cautious with its health-first response? The *Listener* put this and other questions to Hipkins. In hindsight, would it have done things differently?

Hipkins says: "A principle we have adopted is one of continuous improvement and learning. We would never say we got everything right, but we've tried very hard to learn fast within an overall frame of caution, as befits our health-first response."

Asked if the rules around funerals and supporting those at the end of life went too far – especially when 4960 funerals were not held – Hipkins says: "We've long acknowledged, and will continue to do so, the effects of our Covid-19 response on families. Each decision has been difficult because it has involved painful trade-offs. Our guiding principle throughout has been to prioritise a health response in order to save lives, and we are proud of what has been achieved to date. This, however, in no way diminishes the pain of not being able to visit a sick loved one or mark their passing."

Benns wants reassurance that if there is another pandemic or Covid variant, funerals will always be allowed to go ahead. "We need to make sure this never happens again. Even in level 4, they never stopped us going to the supermarket with a whole lot of strangers but someone couldn't come into a funeral home in a small group and say goodbye to their mother. That's just fundamentally wrong." ■