

Plunket needs to front up

I've always liked irony. It drives a lot of my columns. Imagine my reaction then, when the following scenario rolled across our news narrative last month. On January 20, Jacinda announced her pregnancy...and an intention to donate part of her salary to Plunket while she's on maternity leave. A few days later, Plunket announced it will make 53 people redundant.

Spin doctors are adept at picking the "right" moment to announce bad news, and what better time to tell us about job losses than when we're distracted with something so positive as a pregnant, generous Prime Minister, who'd already said her new government will commit \$10 million to fund 100 extra Plunket nurses?

I agree with previous Labour leader David Shearer's statement that Plunket is a national treasure. Back at the beginning of last century, Sir Truby King's initiative in setting up Plunket's forerunner saw New Zealand's infant mortality rate drop to the lowest in the world. Today, something close to 100 percent of Taranaki babies have their early days monitored by a Plunket nurse.

I first became aware of Plunket as a primary-school child, not just through having a Plunket Book like every other kid, but because of where we lived in Mangorei Rd in New Plymouth. We rode trikes down the footpath from our house opposite the girls high school to the dairy near the corner of Devon St, left them in the dairy-owner's safe-keeping, and caught a bus to Fitzroy School.

Over the road from the dairy lived the King family, one of whom was called Truby King, a great-nephew of his famous namesake. We cheeked each other (they were Catholic and we were Methodist, in days when that kind of thing still had visceral meaning). My parents explained the significance of young Truby's name.

It's worth remembering - if you didn't already know, which is unlikely - that while Sir Truby started Plunket's predecessor in Dunedin, he was one of us, Taranaki born and bred, descended from one of the most prominent settler families.

Like pretty much everyone else, I retain a passing interest in Plunket. Hence my concern on January 26 when I read news of the redundancies, which will happen in something called the Plunket Society's central region. Where is that, I wondered? Is Taranaki affected? The news story didn't say.

I looked up the Plunket website and found the name of a Plunket employee Taranaki people could apparently contact after hours on a cellphone number. My first call met a "sorry, wrong number" response. The second to the same number drew a concession that it was indeed a Plunket number, but no longer for the person named. The new owner works for Plunket, but in Auckland. She suggested I ring head office in Wellington.

I did, but got the answerphone (it was a Saturday). I tried an email to a generic address, and to my surprise got a quick reply from a spin doctor. I asked if Taranaki was affected. She said it was. I asked if she could please elaborate. No, came the response: the process was still at staff consultation stage and nothing was decided. I should read the press release. I said it was the second thing I'd read. But there was no further comment. Case closed.

The following week, I called at the New Plymouth Plunket HQ to see if anyone could tell me what will happen to the society's Taranaki services. But nobody could talk to me. Presumably, head office commanded silence.

However, head office ought to know the regional communities it serves are close-knit. While nobody at its local office could tell me anything, there's always someone with second and third-hand connections, people not working there, who will have heard what's happening.

If the ones I tracked down are right, Taranaki's Plunket operation will retain its dozen or so nurses and medical workers, but a half dozen or more staff involved with administration and the organising

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of community services that complement the work of the nurses (like child car seat advice, for instance) have been dispensed with already or will soon be made redundant.

Do we want to know more? I reckon so. Someone running the society - whose "consultation" process was due to finish this week - needs to explain what impact all this will have on our bit of the national treasure. Since the wellbeing of babies and mums may be at stake, we'll want more than platitudinal waffle.