

Comms contorted at covid coalface

I'm not quite ancient enough to have personal recollection of general election nights when voters gathered outside their local newspaper office to learn the result, but I've seen pictures.

The audience capture enjoyed by newspapers was complete, but today we have the opposite extreme in which there is no such thing as a guaranteed way to get a message through to everyone.

Our street was a reminder on the first day of the lockdown version of rubbish collection – it was awash with blue bottle bins and little green food recycling ones.

Few households in our area seemed to know the district council simplified its refuse service down to waste only, with recycling suspended for now.

As it happens, I get the council's media releases so when one came in telling of the change, I was able to warn the 11 other households in what some of us call the "Holsworthy Worthies" neighbourhood group.

I was chuffed our group didn't put bins out, but alarmed at how ineffective the council's means have become to get through to us all.

Not just NPDC is in that predicament. Police were amazed – and sceptical – when they came across people out and about on the first night of the lockdown who said they knew nothing about it.

Most people listen to or watch something, but there are so many "somethings" that when it comes to a crisis like this one, nobody can be confident important official announcements are truly penetrative.

The police line is to take enforcement of public activities at a staged pace, which is wise and will gradually overcome that particular problem.

But there are many others, especially at neighbourhood level, that will be more intractable, especially since the government decided - massively unwisely in my view - to shut community papers.

For example, a friend tells me alarming things about the mental health system, which seems to have no consistent strategy for dealing with severely impaired patients living in the community and who barely function in so-called normal times.

In one case I know about, a patient's craving for cigarettes has destroyed her family bubble and put others at risk. She left the bubble and went alone to the dairy. The family had forewarned the proprietor, who alerted them and they persuaded her home.

But she cannot be restrained there, and Taranaki District Health Board says it can't take her into care in case things turn nasty and they need every bed.

Meantime, while the dairy drama unfolded, her daughter (who lives elsewhere) popped what was left of the bubble by running in to grab her mother's cigarette butts.

At that, the mental health people directed the family to the police station to get a trespass notice and serve it on the daughter themselves.

However, staff at New Plymouth central police station turned them away, scolding them for not staying home, and saying the police had no interest in what the health board might have said.

They told the family to get the trespass notice from the police website. When eventually located, it was filled out and served - a family legally banning one of its own. Such bizarre times.

In other ways, the first few days of isolation have gone as well as expected for most in our neighbourhood. There are opportunities for a distant natter over the fence or at the gate, keeping our two-metre gaps, of course.

But the dairies worry me. The government had no choice about letting them open, given they're more accessible for those who can't get to a supermarket, but in ones I've observed there are varying degrees of precaution being taken, especially by customers.

At one, I saw kids turning up to the door with no means of protecting themselves and seemingly unaware of the dangers their parents were exposing them to.

While the government tries to soothe us with its assurances, there is an apparent breakdown between the political and top bureaucratic levels and the coal-face.

Late last week, a Christchurch pharmacist told *Seven Sharp* she was devising her own rules for dealing with customers – because she hadn't had a word of official advice from anyone.

Jacinda Ardern is performing wonderfully at national level, but she needs to look further down her chain of command to fix some of the problems that still exist - like the health system not talking to the police about a group in its care who have no idea what's happening.