

Secretary's year in review



As we reflect on another extraordinary year for NSW Health – and my first as its Secretary – it is the commitment and dedication of our staff that impresses me most.

Their tireless work in delivering safe and high quality, patient-centred care to the people of NSW, while protecting them through the next stage of a persistent pandemic and multiple emergency events like the devastating floods we have seen across the state, is nothing short of extraordinary.

I would like to also thank my leadership colleagues across NSW Health and to acknowledge the work of the former Secretary, Elizabeth Koff, who helped guide the state's health system through many months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of all I would like to thank each of the remarkable humans of NSW Health – all of us, every day, who continue to work together to improve outcomes for our patients, carers, community and each other.

Future Health is now

The Future Health Strategic Framework builds on the foundations of the previous NSW State Health Plan and continues the work we've done over recent years in areas such as value-based healthcare, the integration of care and in improving the patient experience.

We consulted extensively with our staff, our partners across the sector, as well as patients and the community to formulate the development of Future Health. These insights helped shape our ambitious 10-year plan to deliver a vision for a sustainable health system that delivers outcomes that matter the most to our patients and the community.

Instrumental to the success of Future Health will be the ways that we can support our workforce to collaborate and innovate, to improve health outcomes, and to continue delivering superior healthcare. Realising our vision requires effort from all of us, and all parts of the NSW Health system have a role to play in leading change. Together, we can help make our exceptional health system even stronger and ready to deliver for the next decade.

Powering through a persistent pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic remained a focus for our health system in 2021-22 and has seen the health system work together like never before to protect the community.

The importance of NSW Health in the whole-of government response to the pandemic should not be understated. In the rollercoaster second year of the State Health Emergency Operations Centre's operation, we saw both the Delta and Omicron outbreaks across the globe and here in NSW. The State Health Emergency Operations Centre expanded significantly to include critical areas such as the vaccination program, testing clinics, border control, the quarantine and exemptions programs, airports and maritime surveillance, aged care planning, intensive care unit and ventilator preparedness. There was also a focus on logistics and supply chain delivery, regional assistance and communications.

It is a significant achievement that we were able to stand up more than 450 testing clinics, conduct more than 25 million PCR tests, manage around 557,000 high-risk patients via outbound telephone calls, and deliver 16.4 million vaccines. Our vaccination program contributed to Australia becoming a world leader in the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations, and NSW being the first state to reach a more than 90% double dose vaccination rate.

This volume of work has never been seen before. It was an effort like no other, and everyone involved should be proud.

Supporting our friends in crisis

We saw again this year, the devastation of floods across the state, and I saw firsthand the heartbreaking aftermath in the Northern NSW region.

Many communities experienced significant and personal loss, but that didn't stop our local health districts in quickly responding and continuing to provide health care to those who needed it most – including, in some cases, health staff who had also lost their homes.

We banded together in this extraordinary time of need, with NSW Health staff from across the state including Western Sydney, Northern Sydney, Sydney, Mid North Coast, and Hunter New England local health districts as well as Ambulance NSW, responding to the call and travelled to affected areas when help was needed most.

I was in genuine awe of the determination, community spirit, dedication and commitment shown by the Northern NSW staff, and am deeply grateful to those who travelled from other parts of NSW Health to assist them.

Regional health focus

NSW Health is committed to ensuring that people living in regional, rural and remote NSW can access high quality, timely healthcare and have excellent patient experiences and optimal health outcomes.

The resilience, and resourcefulness, of regional communities has shone through the most difficult of times and continues to be a source of great strength.

The establishment of the Regional Health Division of NSW Health is a key driver in ensuring better health outcomes and a continued focus on regional health. Led by the Coordinator General for Regional Health, the regional health team is working in local health districts across regional NSW, building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders and communicating in a collaborative, respectful and culturally appropriate way.

This ensures strong advocacy of regional health matters and strengthens the coordination, alignment, and integration of activities across the health sector.

A significant apology

This year, we commemorated National Sorry Day on the 26 May with a special event where on behalf of NSW Health, I made a formal apology to survivors of the Stolen Generations.

While past government policies very much still impact the health and wellbeing of our Aboriginal families today, we hope that our apology marks a significant milestone in our history and embraces truth-telling and the ongoing process of healing for our Aboriginal communities.

Clinical care and the human experience

The team at NSW Health continues to lead the way to achieve the three NSW Premier's Priorities. Across the health system, we are working towards improving service levels in hospitals, improving outpatient and community care, and reducing NSW rates of suicide by 20% by 2023.

Delivering the best care during challenging times

There can be little doubt that 2021–22 was one of the most challenging years NSW Health has faced. The Delta and Omicron outbreaks have had a marked impact on our state's health system at every level. The pandemic, combined with the damage wrought on the state as a result of extreme weather events, has meant our already hard-working staff have had to go the extra mile time and time again.

It is thanks to all staff across the NSW Health system that we have continued to deliver safe care to the millions of people who need us every day of every year.

Virtual care enhancing outpatient care

Like all healthcare systems around the world, COVID-19 changed the way care is delivered in NSW. While virtual care is not a new healthcare model, the pandemic provided new opportunities for us to accelerate and invest in the way we deliver virtual care across the state.

NSW Health launched the next stage of our NSW Virtual Care Strategy 2021–2026 to integrate virtual care as a safe, effective, and accessible option for healthcare delivery in NSW. In the last year, 152,500 virtual consultations were hosted via the myVirtualCare platform and used by 25,000 clinicians.

The NSW Telestroke service is another example of how a virtual care model of care is enhancing access to specialist care no matter where you live. It is now fully implemented at 23 regional and rural hospitals across NSW, linking more than 2,300 stroke patients to specialist stroke physicians in metropolitan hospitals via telehealth.

Towards Zero Suicides

We continue to deliver mental health services and care to support the wellbeing of people across the state and there was also a focus on supporting people in flood-affected communities.

New suicide prevention support was rolled out across the state with 20 calming non-clinical hubs called Safe Havens and 20 Suicide Prevention Outreach Teams embedded in communities across NSW. To support flood-affected communities, four pop-up Safe Havens were set up in the areas hardest hit. Instead of struggling alone or heading to an emergency department, anyone who is experiencing mental health distress can now go to one of these purpose-designed Safe Havens.

We also upskilled and supported staff to provide the very best mental health care, with 6,700 staff trained in suicide awareness and response skills under the Community Gatekeeper initiative and trained 1,700 NSW Government staff working outside mental health services in suicide prevention.

In a landmark agreement, NSW was the first state to sign a \$383 million Bilateral Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Schedule with the Australian Government. The agreement will see an even greater increase in mental health and suicide prevention supports for the people of NSW over the next four years.

Delivering health infrastructure

Across NSW, 12 projects were completed, improving health services and creating employment opportunities in both metropolitan and regional areas.

Major new regional construction included the final stage of the \$241.3 million Dubbo Hospital redevelopment, the \$35 million Dubbo Western Cancer Centre, and the \$470 million New Maitland Hospital. Two facilities combining health and aged care services were completed under the \$296.5 million Multipurpose Service Program – the Hay Health Service and Tocumwal Multipurpose Service.

We also fast-tracked the completion of wards in the \$341 million Concord Hospital redevelopment to address the surge in COVID-19 patient numbers.

Under the \$700 million Statewide Mental Health Infrastructure Program, an acute mental health unit at Blacktown Hospital and the first specialist mother and baby mental health unit at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital were opened. To help address growing community need in Western Sydney and South West Sydney, we completed Stage 1 of the \$550 million Nepean Hospital redevelopment and a new clinical service building for Campbelltown Hospital.

The human experience

Several years ago we recognised that supporting our workforce was core to our efforts to transform the patient experience. We listened carefully to our staff members to curate a program of events and activities offered both online and in person, such as monthly Conversations in Human Experience, the Gathering of Kindness, Patient Experience Week and Mini Compassion Labs. These provide safe spaces for reflection, contemplation, and learning. More than 5,000 staff members from all parts of the state have participated and the feedback has been extraordinarily positive.

Our commitment to improve the patient experience was awarded The Beryl Institute's Organizational Innovation Award for creating our reference guide Elevating the Human Experience – A Guide to Action. The award is international recognition for our efforts to put more humanity back into healthcare, for both patients and all of our staff.

Looking back on the year that was, the impacts of COVID-19 do indeed continue to be felt and they will be for some time, but our work in delivering the health system of the future must progress nonetheless. We will continue to do that work with our hallmark integrity, strength, and resilience but most of all with kindness and compassion.



Susan Pearce
Secretary, NSW Health