

## Highlighting the Hidden Heroes of Healthcare

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Responding to a global pandemic requires an unprecedented level of response from public healthcare systems. The role of front-line healthcare workers such as doctors and nurses is well understood. As this article points out, there is a huge range of specialised personnel working behind the scenes to enable front-line clinicians to do their job. They also deserve recognition adapting to unprecedented demands for their timely expertise.

Reflecting on our public health history there is a group of employees who have remained in the shadows until now. COVID-19 highlighted some unlikely healthcare heroes – the people who are passionate about the performance – our corporate and support services.

On the 25 January 2020, Australia woke to health officials announcing our first confirmed case of Coronavirus. Although we watched the world go before us, with Thailand, Japan and the Republic of Korea recording their first cases, evidence released from the [World Health Organisation](#) was becoming highly suggestive this was a situation the public healthcare sector had feared for many years. With the virus exponentially spreading across the world, it now had the potential to be the most challenging and complex pandemic ever faced.

Initially, local and international healthcare advice provided information on testing, treating patients and keeping the public informed of positive cases. Vision of our gowned up and brave clinicians continuously streamed on news bulletins across all media platforms. But what was not widely discussed was the tasks non-clinical workers undertook in their own efforts to protect the lives of the community and clinicians on the frontline. Rapid data sharing, procurement of personal protective equipment, developing accounting solutions and building pop-up clinics took place at record speed prior to the clinicians' arrival to ensure they were in the safest position to respond.

In New South Wales (NSW) there are currently 370 COVID-19 testing clinics, which to date have undertaken over five million tests ([NSW Health 2021](#)). With a population of just less than 8 million ([NSW Government 2021](#)), it is now likely many NSW residents have experienced the infamous, yet effective, nasal swab. Establishing testing clinics is proven to be vital in promoting early detection of community-acquired transmissions, supporting and encouraging testing through quick and convenient options and providing culturally appropriate services for our vulnerable populations. Testing clinics throughout the state have taken on a variety of unusual locations including drive-throughs, showgrounds, bowling clubs, churches and shopping centres. But scoping out and securing these locations is just the beginning.

Due to the nature of the virus, clinics are often rapidly established within hours or days of newly identified hot spots and clusters. This defies public healthcare's usually measured and planned responses, often taking years to design and develop new services and infrastructure. Each clinic location is usually selected based on its ability to offer optimal patient flow, safety and accessibility; however, each building and its geography is proven to be unique. Responding to the need for a new clinic requires the expertise and dedication of a team of corporate and support services to ensure each building is transformed with the potential to see hundreds of patients a day.

Once the location is confirmed, the maintenance teams commence work on constructing signage, fencing and petitions to guide patient flow. Whilst some basic and consistent design principles exist, elements such as traffic flow, wayfinding and protection from the weather changes with each location. On the inside, information technology technicians work to install computers, medical label printers and phones. More complex than just plugging in a device, this usually requires fitting additional data points, testing WI-FI connectivity and routing network configuration. Working remotely during this time, software application specialists create platforms to record patient activity, pathology results and medical notes for coding. Software development enhances data quality that is crucial for contact tracing and funding activities. Meanwhile, anticipating demand for stock, logistics, secure storage and waste management requires negotiation amongst stores, couriers, cleaners and procurement managers. Early on in this internal flurry of activity, the media unit will announce to the public, sometimes in different languages, the clinic will be open within hours. At this point in time, the corporate and support services are as much invested in being part of the frontline as clinicians – there is no allowable delay in providing quality service delivery and patient care.

Once the clinic doors open the corporate and support services retreat to the shadows to observe and monitor clinic activities. Amongst normal daily maintenance, reporting and data reviews they are always close by to receive and action feedback from clinicians, patients and the community. This pandemic has accelerated the development of various partnership agreements, with several healthcare teams, clinical and non-clinical, collaborating and developing a deeper understanding of each other's strengths.

In an increasingly complex healthcare environment, the idea of clinicians 'going solo' is now considered an outdated attitude, demonstrating partnership models create new opportunities that allow public healthcare organisations to thrive in even the most challenging situations. As we look ahead, it is imperative for every healthcare organisation to map its own future in a way that supports its mission, ensures long-term sustainability and encourages a positive business partnering culture. For many healthcare organisations, these multidisciplinary partnerships are the pathway to building a healthy community, not just for the pandemic today but for tomorrow.



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Louise's career focuses on business decision making, strategy development and driving performance improving health outcomes. Her speciality is unlocking the potential of businesses and partnerships.