

Collected Comments on Ashley Bloomfield

New Zealand Doctor Rata Aotearoa reporters asked a range of people in primary care and the wider health sector to comment on the departure at the end of July 2022 of director-general of health Ashley Bloomfield after a four-year term

An amazing demonstration of leadership

“We were very fortunate to have Ashley. It has been an amazing demonstration of someone who could work to Government and ministers...in a hugely challenging decision-making process and at the same time also listen to the population in general and also the providers who were having to deliver services. Not many people could demonstrate such a ‘360’ kind of approach. He has been very open...he has remained human throughout...

“I have never had a programme of work that was as well resourced as we have been through COVID-19 and an enormous amount of trust was given to people on the ground. We have had freedom that we have never had in my experience...

“I think Ashley’s leadership was as good as it could be in the circumstances. Ashley made a contribution over a long period of time prior to COVID, especially with smoke-free and tobacco regulation, where he was a significant player for a period of years. New Zealand has moved really strongly in that space and achieved significant results in reducing smoking harm.” – **Cathy O’Malley**, general manager strategy primary community, Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand Nelson Marlborough

Equity response ‘not well thought through’

“Ashley was a man of the moment as a public health physician and so dealt with COVID-19 for the total population extremely well and provided tremendous comfort and confidence to New Zealanders. However, his equity response was slower, not well thought through or not well actioned. Once again, the implementation for Māori health equity was weak. Whether this was a Government decision or an official’s response based on the assumption that the Government did not want to be seen to be doing more for Māori than others shows how tenuous the impetus to really get equity traction is.

“While his strength was his ability to focus on the COVID response, it was also his weakness: His stewardship role of the health system as director-general of health was less evident. His role was not just as the director general of the health COVID response. There were innovative responses during COVID, but we are concerned that the system has largely let those go by. Whether this was a lack of leadership by Ashley or the business-as-usual response of the health system, time will tell. Whoever takes over from [acting director-general] Diana Sarfati will need to build the policy function of the ministry, strengthen the accountability mechanisms in the system and remember that the director-general is the steward of the whole health system.” – **Papaarangi Reid, Teresa Wall and Rawiri McMree Jansen**, co-leads, Te Roopu Whakakaupapa Uruta

Calm and collected in a disaster

“I felt he was the most amazing, calm and collected man in the middle of such a disaster. He managed to come out with bravery...and I felt when I heard him he was also culturally sensitive, too.” – specialist GP **Malia Funaki**

‘Calming the farm’

“I think one of the things Ashley did really well is he ‘calmed the farm’. His presence just calmed everybody and that sense of calm is really important.” – **Ruth Large**, New Zealand Telehealth Leadership Group chair

‘Holding the boat together’

“I’ve got the ‘curve crusher’ t-shirt...I think he just held the boat together, he was steady and steadfast and, even when things were really difficult, he kept on going. I think New Zealand probably couldn’t have got to where it got to without him.

“The whole practice used to stop, even though we were in chaos, at 1pm to watch his stand-ups on the TV, which was in the middle of the waiting room. So, all the patients and all the staff would all sit and watch the next announcement from Ashley. Phenomenal, really. There has never been anything like that.” – Hauora Taiwhenua Rural Health Network chair and specialist GP **Fiona Bolden**

‘He won the hearts of the nation’

“I think at the forefront of the COVID pandemic his leadership was absolutely needed and he certainly won the hearts of the nation when he got up to do his communications about what was happening. In terms of a legacy, I think he can probably be proud of that.

“The issue, of course...is that the Government has a tendency – more so than him – to operate in a way that they are all-knowing and can do it on their own...They have a tendency not to involve the community or involve iwi and Māori providers from beginning to end.

“They utilised the DHBs to do [immunisation and testing] pop-ups and Māori providers like us decided we’d do it ourselves.” – Te Kōhau Health managing director and Waitangi Tribunal claimant **Lady Tureiti Moxon**

‘Not always well served’

“[Think] about what would have happened if his predecessor were there. He [Ashley] was the right person at the right time. His colleagues didn’t do nearly as well, didn’t always serve him as well. A lot of chief executives...wouldn’t have lasted.” – advisor and retired specialist GP **Peter Moodie**

‘I absolutely value the man’

“The decisions that were made were absolutely at the right time...The Alert Levels in which we moved allowed us time to prepare and to put our strategy together...I absolutely value the man and I think we will miss his expertise, knowledge and wisdom, but I know he will be taking on even more mountains and more valleys.” – **Harriet Pauga**, nurse, Northern Region Health Coordination Centre

A good communicator

“We are incredibly lucky to have him as director-general throughout the pandemic. We had a public health head of the ministry with deep understanding of public health, who was a very good communicator, who told us everything he could whenever he could. He acknowledged when things didn’t go right and worked to fix them.

“From a primary care perspective...there was a sense that the sector and GPs were able to provide advice straight to the ministry and to Ashley, and of how useful that was on a number of occasions.” – Te Awakairangi Health Network chief executive **Bridget Allan**

‘He respects the evidence’

“He respects evidence and I think as academics, we always felt that he was listening. So you have someone with such broad experience, right through the political and clinical...

“He was very much the right guy for the time. The public loved him. His ‘patient’ was the public of New Zealand. He connected with them. I think he did a pretty good job.” – University of Auckland epidemiologist **Rod Jackson**

The right person for the role

“He was absolutely the right person for the role during the pandemic and we are really lucky that we had Ashley as the director-general...he knew where to get support, he was instrumental in getting a Pacific team for COVID-19...I think we as the health system will really miss him and miss his influence. And I hope he remains involved in Aotearoa New Zealand health in some form in the future. I don't know whether that is wishful thinking!

“He's very self-aware and he needs time off or time out, but my one piece of advice is, stick to karaoke and don't do TikTok!” – specialist GP **Api Talemaitoga**

'Not your normal ministry man'

“We have seen real leadership when the country really needed it – unquestionably. I think amongst the rank and file in general practice, we felt we had confidence in him and what he was saying. And that is a world apart from the way we normally feel about the Ministry of Health.

“For us he broke that mould and, on balance, talking to colleagues at [my west Auckland] medical centre, we have given him an A.” – specialist GP **William Ferguson**