

Forestry for Life



Pushing for smoke-free workers

It would be nice to get a healthy forest of people . . . those simple words cover completely all that Dr Tom Mulholland is pushing for.

He's well known for his work with Farm Strong and for encouraging farmers to look after their "top two inches." But now, he's foraying into the world of forestry.

It is somewhat fitting that Dr Tom has found himself working within the industry on the East Coast. Before he went to med school — way back in the 1980s — he worked for the forest service with Gisborne's Kohntrol owner Julian Kohn.

Dr Tom has been here five times this year as part of his Ministry of Health contract, talking to groups, offering free testing and just generally spreading the good health word.

He headed to Tokomaru Bay and Te Puia Springs in his retro Chevy ambulance to talk to groups of workers and do tests for pre-diabetes, lung function, lipids and blood pressure.

The results were enough to make one hardened smoker give up his lifelong habit on the spot.

"If you look at this group of people — about 90 percent of them are smokers, a lot have high blood pressure and are pre-diabetic or have diabetes, which affects your vision," said Dr Tom.

"Having done forestry myself, I know that if the guy next to you is not well, they are at risk of dropping a tree on you."

He has had some workers break down in tears, when talking about the stress they are under.

"They work such long hours and are under extreme pressure. Think about the owner-operator guys who come in from a long day and have to fix their truck in readiness for getting back out there well before dawn the next day."

Forestry workers were one of the most at-risk populations Dr Tom had ever seen.

"You can only plant one tree at a time, so the aim is to change one person at a time," he says. "It would be nice to get a healthy forest of people — they can each help

themselves in getting there too. It's just like looking after a tree — pruning off those branches you don't need, to help you grow taller and stronger."

He spent four years working in forestry, but says being a doctor was something he had dreamt of since he was five.

"I worked in a number of forests but thought it was better to follow my dream."

That said he was happy to be back in the forests.

"I love driving in the forests and wouldn't mind getting back on a chainsaw at some point . . . when the sun is shining it is a great job."

But it wasn't always rosy.

"Sometimes the terrain is steep and the rain is coming down. You wouldn't use a blunt chainsaw in the forest, but many are putting low grade oil in their bodies."

It was the message he conveyed in the pre-dawn hours to hundreds of Ernslaw One workers.

"If I was just a doctor from Auckland

and hadn't worked in forestry it may have been a different story," said Dr Tom. "But I have walked in their boots so have a better understanding of what they go through. I can translate complex medical language so they understand what I am talking about and it isn't so intimidating."

He's not there to judge them but to let them know their health status . . . and when they hear they've lost 20 percent of their lung volume through smoking, it is a big wake up call.

"We don't want to be the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. If you invest in yourself you will be around for your kids and mokopuna. All too often health is the poor cousin of safety. Everyone focuses on how to use a chainsaw but it is the person using the chainsaw that needs the attention."

When he's not saving the nation, Dr Tom is either on his 40-foot catamaran in Auckland or at his house in rural Taranaki recharging his own batteries.

Fit for family

Dr Tom Mulholland got Ernslaw One Gisborne regional manager Iain McInnes thinking.

"They say forestry workers are fit because they are running the equivalent of a marathon a day . . . but get a crew tested and you find that's not actually the case."

Ernslaw One made the most of Dr Tom's visit to town, getting him to talk to around 250 of their workers over two mornings.

"He is a very good speaker carrying an important message we can all learn from," said Mr McInnes.

Dr Tom tested a few of the workers after breakfast and returned "surprisingly poor results."

"He found there were a lot with high blood pressure and high cholesterol which was quite surprising. The forestry industry is always concerned about safety and accidents but we also need to focus on the health part too."

The Eastland Wood Council is striving to see a more holistic approach to health and safety in the local industry.

Mr McInnes says Dr Tom's message was taken to heart by a number of workers.

"One immediately stopped smoking, sugar and salt and is still off them all several months later. He realised he had to make a change and wanted to do it for his mokopuna. Several others have since given up smoking."

Taking that holistic view of health and safety will lead to workers extending their time in the forests.

"With more wood coming on, we constantly need more workers," says Mr McInnes. "This will keep our existing workers safer for longer and they won't be leaving the industry because of health problems."

"Dr Tom really sent us away with plenty of food for thought."

FOGGY AND MUDDY . . . Dr Tom Mulholland and his Chevy ambulance visit an East Coast forestry site.

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Losing some 'cargo'

There's a keen cargo competition underway amongst the truck driving crew at Williams and Wilshier but it has nothing to do with trees.

This year the company introduced Offload Your Cargo — an initiative to help employees get healthier and lose a little 'cargo'.

Operations manager Lance Robertson said the results of the drivers' annual tests were a real wake-up call for them all.

"I looked at them and thought some were not very good results . . . myself included," said Robertson. "The list had a few pretty hefty guys so I thought it was time we did something."

So he put it to the guys, talked to the company's owners and put programmes together covering both food and fitness with the YMCA — the rest is history. Some of the drivers have lost more than 20 kgs and counting.

As well as daily gym sessions, there is a weekly weigh-in. Initially 16 signed up but it's now down to 13.

"The guys work long hours but still manage to get to the gym every day after work. Most Saturdays we meet for a spin class on the bikes or a bit of a boot camp session . . . it is a big commitment."

The challenge started on August 1 and the last weigh-in is on December 3. As well as feeling good about themselves, the guys are driven by the cash

prizes on offer for the top three achievers.

"It's a bit of a carrot to keep them all motivated. A lot of the guys here live week to week, so the incentive of a little extra cash for Christmas is a good one."

And six months after that final weigh-in there will be another, with more cash on the line, to see who has kept the weight off. All who see the programme out and attend each weigh-in will have their gym membership reimbursed by Williams and Wilshier.

Mr Robertson says the challenge has brought with it a change in lifestyle for many.

"All they have to do is make that effort and it won't cost them a thing. A lot are saying they aren't even in it for the money any more, but for the change it has brought for them."

Mr Robertson — who is a regular at the gym with his crew — says the company is reaping the benefits of the challenge.

"Warwick Wilshier had no hesitation in coming on board. We are seeing bigger benefits from it . . . quite a dramatic change."

Some of the guys finish work and head up Kaiti Hill for a quick run.

"These guys sometimes start work at 1am so their days can be long, but now they are in the routine of going to the gym, they see the wider benefits. I am really pleased with what we are achieving."



Onsite health checks for forestry workers

A new partnership between Turanga Health and Eastland Wood Council (EWC) will make it easier for local forestry workers to seek medical help while also taking better care of themselves.

The onsite workplace wellness programmes will include health checks, which are tailored to meet the needs of men and women working in primary industry jobs where it's not always easy to slip away to see a nurse in the middle of the day.

A mobile cooker will also head out into the field and be used as part of nutritional workshops.

EWC chief executive Prue Younger said the joint partnership aims to build a culture of health in the forestry industry.

Turanga Health will take its state-of-the-art mobile clinic staffed by nurses and community health workers high up into the hills and deep into the district's forests.

Turanga Health chief executive Reweti Ropiha says this kind of health check is about more than just talking to someone about eating habits and exercise.

"The initial assessments, which take up to half an hour, will look at a forester's age, gender, ethnicity, weight, family history, blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol

levels, and diabetic and smoking status," says Mr Ropiha.

He says a person's risk of developing heart problems in the next five years will also be assessed. People can be told they have a risk ranging from mild to very high and where appropriate will be directed to their GP or given education.

Medication, alcohol, anxiety and depression are also discussed during the private consultations. Female staff have the chance to talk about women's health issues such as smears and breast checks.

Turanga Health's existing workplace wellness programme is known as Tu Mahi and has already helped staff at Gisborne Fisheries, Cedenco, Coxco, Leaderbrand and other workplaces. Around 1500 forestry workers across the region will benefit.

Mr Ropiha says when workers come inside Turanga Health's four-wheel-drive truck and see it's a fully functional clinic room they are pleasantly surprised.

"We'll be able to park next to the skid site and see forestry crew staff that would otherwise never have the time or ability to get to a medical centre for a check up."

Mr Ropiha says Turanga Health does "whatever it takes" to get health care and support to workers.

"Health services offered Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, don't work for most primary industry staff which is why we take the services to the people inside the factory, on the roadside, or in the forest, any time of the day."



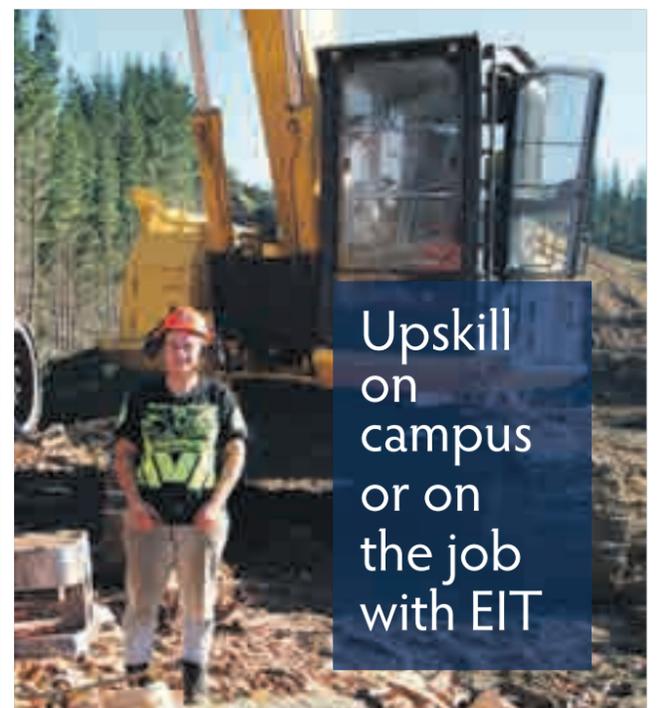
A new initiative to help forestry workers . . . the state-of-the-art mobile clinic will visit crews out on the job. Photo supplied

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