

QG Breakfast Series

Dr Jeannette Young - speech

Dr Jeannette Young, Chief Health Officer, Queensland Health

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land where I am today - the Jagera and Turrbul people and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I have been asked to share with you how I survived the pandemic of 2020 which continues into 2021. There is no one answer, and I genuinely believe it will be different for everyone.

But the one thing that I think is true and something we can each take into our lives is that there are moments when you have to persevere through challenge, because there is no other option. So, I want to share with you how I have done just that over the last 12 months, highlighting the five key things I believe you need in place to make that possible.

In early January 2020, in the midst of bushfires, the states were discussing with the Commonwealth the need to release face masks from the national stockpile, and the Commonwealth cautioned that we may need to be conservative in our use given a new virus coming out of China.

By mid to late January 2020, it was clear that this was a serious situation and my first thought was that I didn't want to do it, I didn't want to have to face a pandemic in Queensland. I immediately called my husband, Graeme, who was in Mooloolaba and pleaded with him to come home.

His support has been vital from the very beginning. He has been there taking care of me and supporting me to do whatever I needed to lead Queensland through the pandemic, including being a brilliant sounding board who would tell me if he thought I got something wrong or needed to rethink my approach. As an eminent microbiologist, his was a perspective that I very much trusted and respected.

Given the very long hours and 7 day work weeks for the past 12 months, I could not have made it through to today without Graeme as my anchor at home, asking nothing of me than to try and make sure I made it home at a reasonable time each night for dinner, even if the work would continue into the night.

The first key thing you need to get through a challenge is to make sure that you have a supportive network outside of work, whether that is family, friends, or others with whom you feel safe and supported. People to be there to listen without judgement and, if you are fortunate enough like I was, provide you a fresh perspective and be willing to challenge you.



Having my personal networks in place, the second key thing is having a strong system that I could quickly activate and then rely upon.

In my role as Chief Health Officer over the last 15 years I have been able to develop a strong system, based on disaster management and public health fundamentals. This system is underpinned by a network of trusted experts, each of whom is an invaluable source of advice and support.

I was fortunate to be able to trial this system with the Swine Flu (H1N1) pandemic in 2009. This was a warm-up act for what we didn't know was coming. I could take the lessons learned from that pandemic and improve the system further, refining what worked and learning from what didn't work.

This earlier experience meant that Queensland's system is robust, such that it could be rapidly stood-up in an emergency and I did just that on 25 January 2020.

Activating the State Health Emergency Coordination Centre was a pivotal first step in Queensland's response. The people, past and present, who have worked in this activation have been extraordinary and provide representation from across a number of Queensland Government departments.

Knowing that I could trust SHECC and the systems in place gave me the confidence to go early and advise the Queensland Government that they should declare a public health emergency, which is what happened on 29 January 2020.

Queensland was the first state in Australia to make this call, and was well ahead of the World Health Organization, but I knew that if we were going to respond to COVID-19 and the looming pandemic that we had to go early and fast.

In addition to the systems in Queensland, Australia has been well served by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, which, in my view, has been one of the most crucial committees to inform how we responded as individual jurisdictions and a country.

I have found the discussions with my other Chief Health and Medical Officers and public health experts invaluable in formulating my thinking. There are times when this group does not all agree, and the value is in those disagreements. They certainly helped me to see other ways of doing things and make a decision about which parts of an approach might be right for Queensland.

The second key thing you need to get through a challenge is making sure you have developed productive professional networks and, for our leaders, a system that operates when you need it to. What this means is making sure that you are planning in the quiet times.

Use those times when things are steady to think about what you will need in place if you had to face your own significant challenges - are there any gaps you need to fill or skills

you need to develop in yourself or your team, how do you give yourself the best chance at rising to the challenge.

Even if you cannot predict everything you will need, the more prepared you are the better the chance that you will be able to face the challenges without burning out. With the personal and professional scaffolding in place, the next key thing is to decide a course of action.

In the beginning we did not know very much about the virus or how to respond so I drew from the skills and experiences I had developed over the course of my career.

From when I was an emergency doctor having to make quick decisions, to dealing with H1N1, to aiding Queensland in responding to many natural disasters, all of these experiences helped me to be able to set a direction for Queensland in response to COVID-19.

Setting this direction in such a tumultuous time was daunting. Especially because everyone wanted to feel safe and part of that was an expectation that we could provide certainty.

For example, when we had the lockdown in Greater Brisbane everyone wanted to know if it would only last for three days or might be extended.

However, we genuinely did not know at the start of that lockdown what might need to happen next. It depended on a range of different factors, including whether there was any evidence of further transmission in the community.

Proposing a course of action that would have such drastic consequences is not a decision I take lightly but I knew that it was the right direction for the safety of our State in the face of a variant of concern potentially spreading through our community.

There was no certainty that I could provide around that situation, no crystal ball showing everyone what it would look like in three days. But I could provide certainty around the system, it knows how to respond to outbreaks and the system would work the way it should to give Queensland the best chance at coming out of the lockdown as scheduled.

When setting a direction in a constantly changing landscape it is important to accept that you may have to change course.

Now, anyone who has had to do this should know that it is not always a sign of a deficiency in the original decision but an acknowledgement that the situation may have changed or there is new information to suggest that a different approach is warranted.

Knowing when to change course and when to hold the line can be difficult and you will not always make the right call but the third key thing you need to persevere through challenge is to ask nothing more of yourself than that you make a decisive call about which course of action to take based on the information available at the time the decision is made.

Sometimes people will not understand why a particular course of action was taken one time and not the next, but they won't necessarily have all of the facts so don't be discouraged in changing course or seeming inconsistent. Provided there is a sound reason for the difference in approach, then you should feel confident to push through.

The other side of setting a direction is having the confidence to back yourself. You cannot expect people to have confidence in you if you do not have confidence in yourself and your decisions.

I have had the benefit of being able to build a reputation over my 15 years as the Chief Health Officer, working together with Government and my public servant colleagues before the pandemic began.

I have no doubt that if I had been in the role for a shorter period of time, as many of my interstate colleagues have, that this would have made leading this pandemic more difficult, not impossible, but certainly more difficult.

I was able to build upon that existing relationship of trust to get across the public health advice that was critical to our pandemic response. Through my self-confidence I gave everyone around me the surety that what we were doing was right for Queensland.

This relationship goes both ways as I knew that the Premier was doing such a remarkable job leading all of the parts of the pandemic response: economic, social and political, that it allowed me to focus on the health response and what we needed to stop our state from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 like other countries in the world.

I like making decisions. However, there have been many times in the past 12 months when the energy I derive from leading and decision-making has been tested, particularly when the decisions I have had to make for the safety of all Queenslanders have had far reaching impacts.

Never before in my career have I made decisions that impacted the lives of every Queenslanders, and many who also lived outside our borders.

Every time I made a decision there was public scrutiny, good and bad, and sometimes criticism. Some people felt particularly aggrieved by the decisions being made that I received some very nasty threats. While this was unpleasant, the outpouring of support from the Queensland community was remarkable. There were days when my office looked like a florist shop with all of the beautiful flowers people were sending with words of kindness for my role in the response.

I even quite enjoyed having a protective detail for a short time, as it meant that I had to be driven to work, which allowed me to make a head start on my emails for day. Despite the threats and negativity, I never wavered in the confidence I had about what we were doing here in Queensland to manage the spread of COVID-19.

Another part of having confidence in yourself and your decisions is knowing what you need to keep control of and what can be given away, which is made easier when the system and professional networks are in place to enable the sharing of responsibility.

One of the pivotal functions I needed to retain throughout the pandemic was the role of communicator. When you need to deliver a lot of information to the community over a long period of time there is enormous value in having familiar messengers, which is why I have done more press briefings over the past 12 months than I have in the previous 14 years.

There were lots of people who wanted to speak, but we had to have consistent messengers to build trust and confidence with the community through a few clear voices. So this was a role I have maintained today and will continue to fulfil as the pandemic continues.

Of course I can take on this task because I have people like my Deputy Chief Health Officer and Deputy State Health Coordinator managing the public health and operational aspects of the response. This delineation of roles has worked so well, allowing them to concentrate on implementing the response while I communicated with the public about what we were doing.

I know that confidence is not a skill everyone has, but it is just that, a skill. Something to be practiced and developed until it feels natural and it is the fourth key thing you need to persevere through a challenge. Without confidence you may burnout as so often women leaders, at all levels, doubt themselves and their decisions, carrying worry and concern about whether they have taken the right action.

We all need to remember that not everyone gets it right every time, especially when a situation is new or challenging, but you place yourself in the best possible position if you build a great and trusted team, and back yourself and your experience.

The fifth and final key thing you need to persevere through a challenge is to look after yourself. I am ashamed to admit as the Chief Health Officer that I have never been one to exercise, I stay active in other ways.

But given the gruelling nature of this response, and lack of any time to do other activities, I decided to take my own advice and do 30 minutes of exercise at the start of every day. I always understood the benefit of exercise of course, but I was surprised at how important this has become to my day. It really centres me, lets me start the day clear and focused. I also sleep a lot better.

Part of my self-care also comes from work. I really enjoy my role, and for the most part, am energised by it. Getting to see how far we have come in just over 12 months since this all began and are now rolling out the vaccine is just brilliant. It is a privilege for me to lead everyone through this pandemic and on our way back to our new normal.

I have also been able to sneak in some business as usual work, such as releasing the CHO Report last year, which I was so pleased about. Being able to still progress non-COVID-19 work that is very important to me was a welcome relief.

The fifth key thing you need to persevere through challenge is to make the time to look after yourself.

So often it is easy to prioritise everything else over yourself, but regardless how busy you are you have to consciously make time to do that activity that helps you to feel centred and prepared to meet the challenge each day.

While I still advise that everyone needs to make time to do 30 minutes of exercise each day for overall health and wellbeing, this may not be the activity that energises you and contributes to you being able to keep going so make sure you take time to find and explore that activity whenever you can.

I have spoken all about persevering through challenge. Picking yourself up each day to keep going even when it seems insurmountable. While this is important, I want to make sure that everyone listening to this address also understands that this does not mean that you have to just tolerate whatever is thrown your way.

Persevering through challenge is possible because the five key things are in place: personal support, professional networks and system, decisive actions, confidence, and self-care.

Even with all of these elements persevering is still demanding. But without them, persevering through challenge can be almost impossible and may even be detrimental to you.

If you find yourself in that type of situation consider what you might need to turn it around, what key things are missing that you can influence to change or implement, or where you might need to go for support.

Marie Curie famously said 'Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained.'

It has been over 115 years since this sentiment was echoed by Madame Curie and yet it remains true for all women. We must persevere through challenge, being confident in our own ability to tackle whatever it is we are facing.

COVID-19 has been a challenge unlike any other I have faced. While I would never have asked to lead a pandemic, I am grateful for the experience. I have gained new skills, tested myself, and been at the front seeing our community come together to protect each other from the spread of infection.

Thank you all for sharing in this journey with me today.