

Whakaari/White Island eruption: Inside a burns unit in the days after a disaster

11 Dec, 2019 6:15pm



Focus: White Island eruption | Day 3 | 30 patients in six hospitals, 25 are in critical condition. Video / George Novak / Auckland Rescue Helicopter Trust / Mark Mitchell / Ben Fraser / @sch / Tamara Josephine

Severe burns are among the most traumatic injuries a person can endure but the Whakaari/White Island patients will be receiving world-class care, a nurse who worked in a burns unit says.

"You have practice simulations where they do a mock disaster, so you are prepared. But when it does happen you still can't quite believe it," said the woman, who asked not to be named as she still works in the health sector.

"Normally it would be a train or plane crash or something like that. It's just horrific what's happened... as well as their burn injuries they obviously will have inhalation burns from the different gases. So that is a battle in itself."

In the period after hospitalisation the focus would include surgically removing as much burnt tissue as possible, she said, as well as monitoring internal organs. Some patients would likely be on a ventilator and heavily sedated.

Maintaining body temperature and guarding against infection was also crucial.

"The skin is the biggest organ of the body and it protects us. So they do lose their body temperatures very quickly. Being such a big burn area and having lost so much skin, even though they can have antibiotics, because it's a volcanic eruption they're probably going to be higher risk for infection."

The former nurse said surviving severe burns was "probably one of the most traumatic injuries or assault on a body that a person can go through", but staff in the burns units would be beside patients on that journey.

"When they have a good day you have a good day. If they have a bad day you invariably have a bad day. It is challenging but very rewarding. I stand in awe of those doctors and nurses - the amount of time they spend in theatre, the hours working in a very high temperature.

"It is a multidisciplinary team - the doctors, nurses, the physios and dietitian, OTs [occupational therapists], the clinical psychologists, healthcare assistants, the cleaners - they all work together to make sure the patient gets the best possible care. They are very passionate about what they do, and are a very dedicated team."



The explosion on Whakaari/White Island hit while tour groups were on the volcano. Photo / Instagram

The country's four regional hospital burns units in Middlemore Hospital, Christchurch, Waikato and Hutt Valley are at capacity following Monday's eruption, with many patients in critical condition.

Some patients may be transferred to Australian hospitals when well enough, in order to be closer to family. Middlemore Hospital's burns unit received the equivalent of a year's worth of work in one day since the eruption.

Michele Henry, spokeswoman for the Burn Support Group Charitable Trust, told the *Herald* that when the time is right they will offer any help they can.

The situation was unusual because many of the patients were from overseas, she said, but the charity has helped past patients by providing in-hospital support and advice, and arranging for them to meet somebody else who has survived severe burns.

"It's just vitally important for them to understand that they are not alone.

"Burns is just a very long, hard journey. It is an individual journey, and everyone has their own story with it. It is emotional, psychological, physical - you name it, just every stage to go through moving forward."