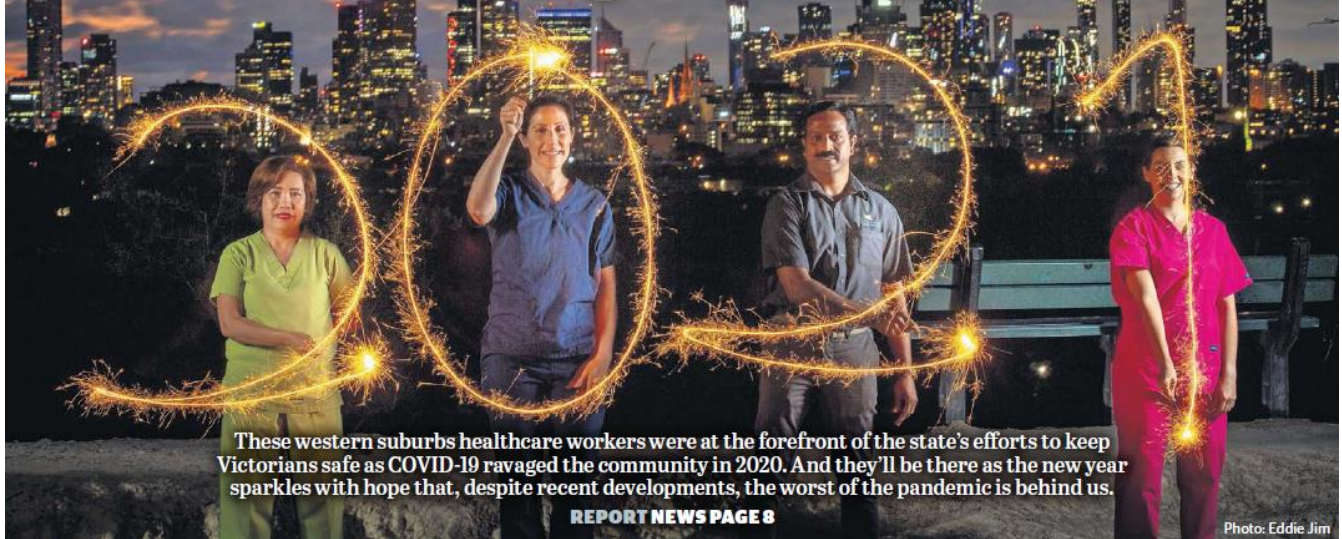


# THE AGE

INDEPENDENT. ALWAYS.

## To our good health



These western suburbs healthcare workers were at the forefront of the state's efforts to keep Victorians safe as COVID-19 ravaged the community in 2020. And they'll be there as the new year sparkles with hope that, despite recent developments, the worst of the pandemic is behind us.

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Photo: Eddie Jim

### After 'the worst' year, Sunshine Hospital staff are now hoping for the best

**Clay Lucas  
Aisha Dow**

Sunshine Hospital nurse unit manager Joyce Dalde says 2020 fundamentally changed her as a person, but she also knows that 2021 is going to be different "because we're more prepared for what will go on".

Ms Dalde can't remember the first time she heard about coronavirus, but by March it had overtaken her life, as the ward she leads was converted into a COVID-19 unit and then split in two as patient numbers surged.

As Victoria grappled with its deadly outbreak, she said most people at the hospital worked longer hours than normal and some of her staff caught coronavirus.

Ms Dalde had to tell some relatives of those who died that they couldn't come to the hospital.

"With the blink of an eye, a family member's gone," she said.

For healthcare workers across Victoria, 2020 has undeniably been a terrible year; most in the sector witnessed their colleagues become both physically and psychologically exhausted.

But Ms Dalde said while 2020 was tough, she had been inspired by her colleagues' determination to simply keep going. Best of all, while her ward is still dedicated to suspected coronavirus patients, it is the only specialist ward left. And the last time they had a confirmed

case was on October 2.

"We are stronger than ever - we know what we're dealing with now, so 2021 can't be worse than 2020. No one had ever prepared us for what was as intense as this year."

Ask the hospital's supervising patient service assistant Murali Erra Laxminarayana for words to describe 2020 and his description is simple: "The worst."

He first heard of the virus in December 2019, while transiting through Thailand on the way to India for a holiday with his wife and their four-year-old. On their way home, they picked up his mother-in-law in Hyderabad and brought her back to Australia for a holiday.

“She’s still with us because she cannot go home, it’s not safe,” said Mr Erra Laxminarayana, who has seen his home and work life transformed by the coronavirus.

In the past the patient service assistant of eight years would don personal protective equipment regularly, “but not for the whole day. Sometimes it’s suffocating with the masks.”

He too says that no matter what the year to come brings, 2021 will be simpler because the hospital is now so prepared. “Before, we didn’t know anything about it. So it will be less difficult.”

While 2020 has had its challenges for physiotherapist Stefanie Agostino, the care co-

ordinator in the hospital’s emergency department, it has come with positives – chief among them being the resilience she’s watched develop in her workplace.

“We’re meeting these challenges that we thought we never would,” she said. A key one is making it possible for more patients to recuperate at home – and more have wanted to be at home.

“Patients’ ultimate goal was to get in and get out,” she said, because of fears of catching coronavirus. It’s a key fear of healthcare workers too, who have to face it as a daily part of their job.

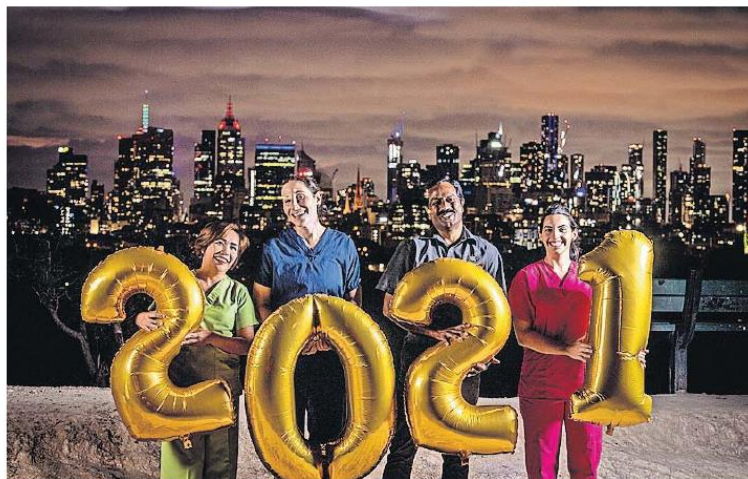
“Every day working in the emergency department there was always that worry, of ‘will I take

something home to my family?’ “ Fortunately, she and her family emerged unscathed.

For Nicky Dobos, an intensive care specialist who works at both Sunshine and Footscray hospitals, 2020 was “extremely challenging”.

The bright side, the doctor of 15 years said, was the wonderful sense of teamwork that emerged among health workers as they fought their way through a dark year into 2021.

“We’re used to operating in very stressful environments, but I do believe it was the psychological support we all gave each other through the peak of the pandemic in Victoria that allowed us to get through.”



From left: Sunshine Hospital’s Joyce Dalde, Nicky Dobos, Murali Erra Laxminarayana and Stefanie Agostino. Photo: Eddie Jim