

Covid 19 coronavirus: Sex workers struggle with contact-tracing clients ... but a humble 'coffee cart' shows the way

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By Katie Todd of [RNZ](#)

Sex workers say they are struggling to balance the privacy of their clients with the need to record contact tracing information.

While the industry got the go-ahead to restart last Thursday, many workers have been reluctant to resume regular intimacy straight away.

Wellington escort Hollie* is sitting idle on a backlog of booking requests, uncertain about the advice of the Prostitutes Collective and WorkSafe to collect the date, time and location of bookings - including every client's name, phone number and email address.

"I don't see many of my clients being fine with giving their real name and their numbers. There's probably a couple of clients that are cool with it, but I'd say the majority won't really be down for that," she said.

Another escort in Christchurch, Jordan, had started seeing some of her regular clients again, but was worried about other sex workers who were not in a position to pick and choose from booking requests.

"For some sex workers there's going to be a hard choice between seeing a client, and maybe not being able to get proper contact information, versus turning down that client and probably much-needed funds," she said.

"For me, I'm seeing regular clients and I believe they're giving me their real name and real contact number, and we've made a verbal agreement that we will share that information if something goes wrong on either side. But a lot of people don't have that decision."

Prostitutes Collective national co-ordinator Dame Catherine Healy acknowledged that could be a problem - especially for independent workers - but said her advice was still a firm "no" to anyone who was refusing to provide contact information.

"It's for the community's wellbeing as well as [clients] and sex workers' own wellbeing," she said.

However Healy said many agencies had existing contact-tracing solutions to deal with possible HIV infection, which could be adapted for Covid-19.

"There's the good old fashioned system of writing down your number, like we're all doing at cafes, then putting it in a box that remains sealed so nobody gets to see - unless there's a Covid outbreak, in which case, handing data over to the health protection folk who absolutely work to very high standards," she said.

The Government officially launched a new contact tracing app yesterday allowing people to privately log places they have recently visited.

However some sex workers said they still wanted their own system, because they were doubtful their clients would make any record of using their services, or pass it on to health authorities if prompted.

Jordan has subscribed to the "Covid Register" QR App and had an idea to quell those concerns.

"You sign up as a business - and for me clients aren't going to want to check into a brothel, or 'your local sex worker', so I've created a coffee cart that they can check into. If the Ministry of Health were to check in, you can say you've been in close contact with somebody within breathing distance of that coffee cart."

Sex worker and academic Dr Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith said it was only fair that people using and appreciating the services of sex workers extended the same respect to their health.

"I'd hope there'd be a reasonable number of clients that would behave responsibly and realise if it was going to be a huge problem for them to provide us with accurate details, maybe they should just wait until we're at a lower level to resume seeing sex workers," they said.

Dame Catherine Healy said it was going to take a bit of co-operation from everyone in the industry to find the balance between respecting anonymity and preventing the spread of Covid-19.

*Name has been changed for privacy.

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