

A steady hand and a calm presence: Maria's impact at Eastern Health Authority

At Eastern Health Authority (EHA), nurses don't just administer vaccines, they build trust, ease fears and offer care that lingers long after an appointment ends. For Maria Gava, who first joined us in 2011 and now leads our immunisation team, nursing is both a profession and a personal calling. Read on to hear how one warm, humble nurse has helped shape a culture of confidence and care, one family at a time.

A purposeful path

Three days a week, Maria walks into Eastern Health Authority (EHA) with decades of experience, a calm presence and a knack for making anxious parents feel safe. That's more than enough to change a community.

Maria always knew she wanted to be a nurse. She was sixteen when she applied for her first training role - quietly encouraged by her older brother but firmly opposed by her father. Raised in a traditional Italian household, Maria knew what she was risking. Still, she went anyway.

"I knew that nursing was what I wanted to do," says Maria. "I've always had this insatiable interest in learning how people heal."

Maria went on to train through hospital-based programs and spent years in regional hospitals, raising a family along the way. Later, she returned to university to become a Registered Nurse and expand her clinical scope. Around that time, one of her children had a strong reaction to a vaccine. That moment sparked something deeper.

"There's something incredibly satisfying about giving people the right information, easing their worries and making it a better experience for them. It's not just about administering a vaccine; it's everything around it."

Maria initially joined us in a part-time role and found herself in a supportive and skilled team, passionate about public health and immunisation. After four years, she



left briefly to keep her acute nursing skills sharp but soon realised how much she missed the EHA environment. She returned in a casual capacity and eventually stepped into the Immunisation Coordinator role.

"I missed it. I missed the people, the families, the rhythm of the clinics. There's something about this place that makes coming to work feel good."

The power of care

Immunisation work is often underestimated and misunderstood. For Maria, it's an intricate balance of clinical skill, emotional intelligence and timing. She's vaccinated many children over the years, each one different, each family bringing their own worries and hopes into the clinic room.

Out in the community she's known for her gentle hand, calm voice and ability to connect with even the most anxious parent or adolescent. Her method? Listening. Not rushing. Making space.

One story in particular has stayed with her. Two young women, recent arrivals from the Philippines, were referred to EHA for catch-up immunisations. With no existing records, they needed multiple doses across several months. Maria met them part-way through their schedule and immediately noticed how reserved and fearful they were.

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Over time, they built a rapport. They chatted. They laughed. And, after their final appointment, Maria received a message thanking her for her gentleness and kindness. It spoke to the way Maria had made them feel like they had a second mum in Australia.

"When I read it, I had to stop for a moment. You don't do this job expecting that kind of praise. But when someone tells you they felt safe, or that you reminded them of home, that's something you carry with you."



Maria doesn't talk herself up. She believes any of her colleagues would've done the same. But stories like these tell their own truth. In a system often stretched for time, Maria offers something different: presence.

Building what comes next

Today, as an Immunisation Coordinator, Maria oversees programs across five councils, manages outreach and school clinics and supports a small team of nurses. It's specialised work, often requiring independence and confidence - something that can be daunting for nurses new to the profession.

"This isn't a first job," she says. "You need a solid foundation in nursing. It's repetitive work, but it's also deeply rewarding. It's ideal for someone who can work with autonomy and care."

Maria is now focused on mentoring the next wave of immunisation nurses. She doesn't believe in micromanaging. Instead, she offers her time, shares her knowledge and gives people space to grow.

"You need warmth to do this work. Empathy, patience and a good dose of humour also help. But you also need to be solid. You need to know your stuff and be okay working on your own."

She's proud of the culture at EHA, one with trust, humour and strong relationships across generations. "We're a small team. We rely on each other. You work in a clinic together, you get to know each other well. There's a lot of trust here."

As Maria begins to wind down her career and plan her eventual step back, she is thinking about succession. She wants to leave the program in capable hands.

Until then, she'll keep showing up - steady, calm and quietly making a difference.

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