Heart operation a first

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CLOSER TO HOME: Cardiologist Nick Fisher, right, with Wairemana, the first person to have the angioplasty operation at Nelson Hospital.

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The first patient of hundreds who will receive life-saving heart operations in Nelson each year says the procedure was "pretty straightforward".

Nelson man Wairemana, 39, on Monday became the first New Zealand patient to receive heart artery-clearing surgery away from a specialised cardio-thoracic surgery unit.

Nelson patients previously had to travel to Wellington for the angioplasty percutaneous coronary intervention procedure.

Surgeons on Monday performed the first of what they hope will be up to 400 of the operations each year in Nelson, significantly increasing the number of people who can receive them.

Recovering in hospital Tuesday morning, Wairemana said it was the third time he had received the operation, but being able to have it in Nelson made it a lot less traumatic.

"Having whanau around is really important."

He said he hoped to check out of hospital Tuesday, which was within the same time period as his two previous operations, which were in Wellington.

Tongariro-born Wairemana wore a gifted Maori cloak with "spiritual significance" while recovering in hospital, but said heart problems weren't just a Maori problem, and anyone with chest pains should be checked.

He hoped more Nelson patients would get heart check-ups and, if they needed it, the operation.

"There's a lot of people here that have been too afraid to go to Wellington."

Being away from family, as well as fear of finding out they had a heart problem, had stopped people getting heart check-ups, he said.

Nelson Hospital interventional cardiologist Nick Fisher said the operation, which involved putting a catheter into coronary arteries to keep them open, had gone well and "in most cases like this, patients should be able to go home the next day".