



Taking an outback step



Indigenous health issues are well known, in particular the community's susceptibility to chronic diseases like diabetes and the associated foot health problems. In remote areas these issues are even more prominent because access to healthcare is limited.

This is why organisations like North and West Remote Health (NWRH) in Mount Isa – formerly Medicare Local – are so valued. This is a not-for-profit government contracted primary health care organisation which provides a variety of medical and allied health services to 32 mainly indigenous communities across 600,000 kilometres of remote, sunburnt Queensland. This means staff members travel great distances each week to see clients.

A key NWRH strength is its ability to develop and deliver innovative, culturally competent services and solutions with a unique approach. They provide tailored solutions for their clients in a variety of health care areas, which appealed to one newly graduated Podiatrist, Frances McCaffrey.

Frances recently joined the team at NWRH, missing her university graduation at the University of Newcastle because she had already started work.

Now as a newly qualified podiatrist, Frances is an example of how new graduates can start out a Podiatry career doing something quite different and according to Frances, very rewarding. However it is not her first encounter with the outback.

"Prior to gaining my qualification as a podiatrist I worked as a nurse in other remote locations around Australia and found this a rewarding and challenging career. So while on the surface it might seem like a massive change shifting from Sydney to Mount Isa, it was a natural progression for me," she said.

Frances explained that it is a tight knit group of allied health professionals she works with, including Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologists, Dietitians, Physiotherapists, Mental Health Professionals and Social Workers, who like her are passionate about delivering services to remote indigenous communities and helping them with their health problems.

"There are so many facets of working in the outback that I appreciate. It is so vast with pockets of beauty everywhere. Some weeks I'll be dodging emus and camels while driving out to communities like Boulia, Dajarra or Camooweal, other weeks we'll brave the turbulence and fly in small airplanes to areas in the Gulf of Carpentaria like Mornington Island. I like working in indigenous communities, there's just a genuine quality that pervades the atmosphere," she explained.

Frances agreed that diabetes is the worst cause of foot health problems in the indigenous communities and the biggest challenge for her can be the feeling of isolation.

"By far the main foot health problems I see are due to chronic disease such as diabetes. Providing Podiatry

services to these communities is vital in maintaining good foot health outcomes," Frances said.

"The biggest challenge by far is the feeling of isolation. Despite internet and teleconferences, the ability to interact with tertiary centres and participate in professional development opportunities remains difficult. The lack of infrastructure in these communities also means you have to use a little creativity to achieve the desired outcome."

However finding solutions and dealing with problems is something Frances enjoys and says is her greatest lesson so far in this role.

"A key lesson is that finding creative solutions to unique problems is something that can be learnt and is not an

inherent skill! I've also learnt to be satisfied even with small successes.

For example, when I first started working in a particular community, one of my clients would routinely flee to the bush when he heard the podiatrist was in town, but now, through regular visits I've been able to assist this client not only to access podiatry services on a more regular basis, he has become interested in accessing other services for himself and his family," she said.

Working for NWRH Frances says is a rewarding experience providing a unique lifestyle that has brought her many new friends. But what will happen in the future? "I'm not sure what's around the corner, but I'm very excited to find out," Frances concluded.

Volunteers Needed - Matthew Talbot Hostel

If you can spare a few hours now and then, the clients will really appreciate your help. Anyone considering offering their services will be warmly welcomed! We can buddy you with a fellow podiatrist or you can go with a friend and add your time to CPD hours.



For inclusions and information please call Alexandra Viles on 0403 056 234