

Report on 3 months Family Medicine Programme Rotation to the Victorian
Aboriginal Health Service November 1978 - February 1979.

Dr. Liz Brumer.

The 3 months I have spent working as a Family Medicine Programme trainee at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service have been a most rewarding and enjoyable experience. The staff and patients have all taught me a great deal. I can only praise the efforts of all the people involved in providing this vital community service.

Initial Impression

In contrast to many other medical establishments the VAHS immediately imparts an easy-going, friendly and non-threatening atmosphere. And it has continued to prove just that. People are easily attracted to the place both as patients and as visitors.

Medical Role

I was involved in primary general-practice-type medical care of Aboriginal patients. There is a great deal of serious ill-health so often due to poverty and unemployment, discrimination, lack of education, making the VAHS not only a worthwhile, but an essential service.

A Vital Community Service

From talking with the patients I quickly became aware that if it wasn't for the VAHS, most of the patients would receive no medical attention at all.

There are a number of reasons for this.

- Discrimination -- it's sad that Aboriginals are often treated badly in public hospitals and by some private doctors; this leads to mistrust and failure to seek medical help.

The VAHS being a "Koorie Service for Koories" makes the patients feel at ease and can best cater for the needs of Aboriginal health.

- Lack of understanding by doctors of Aboriginal culture and problems.

Although the doctors employed by the VAHS are white, they are obviously sympathetic and more in tune with Aboriginal needs.

- Prohibitive expense of medical care.

Medical treatment and drugs are free to the patients of the VAHS.

- Inaccessibility of medical centres.

A pick-up scheme makes the VAHS accessible to people who have no means transport.

Community Role

As well as being a medical centre, the VAHS acts as a focal point of the Aboriginal community. It helps to keep the community together and can reach many more people than a mere medical clinic.

Field Trips

I was involved in weekly trips to Shepparton and Morwell. The large number of patients attending, the high degree of ill-health, and the preponderance of unsympathetic local doctors, all make it very necessary for these trips be continued.

Preventive Medical Schemes

I fully support Dr. Dobbin's ideas on setting up preventive programmes

for blood pressure checks, testing for diabetes, hearing tests and immunization of children. I hope these can become a reality soon.

There is also a need for an educational programme to teach the community about healthy living, nutrition, etc.. Perhaps the equivalent to the Weight Watchers' Association could be set up to educate and encourage people with weight problems.

Finance

I've sadly become aware of the inadequate funds the VAHS has to struggle under, and of the sacrifices made and energy expended to fight for more Federal assistance.

I think it would be a crime and the Government would have a lot to answer for if the Service was forced to close because of lack of money,

Education

Most white people, including doctors, are quite ignorant about Aborigines, the culture, the problems, the needs.

Aborigines are obviously a beautiful humane people and, sadly, the whites have to be taught this. One way is to actually come into contact with the Aboriginal community - I'm sure every FMP trainee spending 3 months at the VAHS will be a better more understanding human being for it, and will impart his new-found understanding to those who have not been so fortunate as to work amongst Aborigines.

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F.M.P. Trainee.