Outback and In Again … a New Graduate's Experience of Rural and Remote Nursing

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Graduate Nurse Program run through Alice Springs Hospital is one of only a few places in Australia to offer new and enthusiastic nurses the opportunity to explore a career path in remote health. Alice Springs, located in the geographical centre of Australia, provides a valuable learning environment for those with an interest in Indigenous and rural or remote health care.

It has been well acknowledged that attracting and retaining health professionals to rural and remote areas is highly problematic. Turnover rates among nursing staff are alarmingly high, and pose enormous challenges for ensuring access and continuity of care. While much of the attention has focused on attracting medical professionals to these regions, the crisis in rural and remote nursing cannot be ignored much longer. Nurses constitute the largest section of the health workforce. In rural and remote Australia, the demographics of this current workforce, show them to be reflective of Australia’s population generally. The average age of nurses in these areas is mid 40s and without a strategic approach to attracting nurses into rural and remote practice, this can only lead to an even greater vacuum in the nursing workforce within the next decade.

**ALICE SPRINGS HOSPITAL GRADUATE NURSE PROGRAM**

Alice Springs Hospital has developed a number of innovative partnerships aimed at addressing the potential shortfall. One of these has been the Partnership in Practice scheme, which sees the hospital jointly employ personnel who will also work in remote area health centres, as the dedicated relief for nursing staff. Another has been the inclusion of a remote rotation as part of the Graduate Nurse Program.

Participants in the program, get to select three rotations over the twelve month period. Two must be in adult and paediatric areas, with the third able to be a specialty area, which includes remote practice. The aim of this inclusion is to provide not only a valuable and extensive learning opportunity for the neophyte nurse, but to provide an insight into the field of rural and remote nursing, that hopefully will ensure a future workforce. Exposure to a specialty, at both undergraduate and graduate level, is cited as significant in determining career paths for many health professionals.

**A NEW GRADUATE’S EXPERIENCE**

Choosing where to participate in a Graduate Nurse Program is a daunting task for the thousands of annual university graduates, who desire a year of “hands on” clinical,
learning. While there will always be differing opinions as to what makes a successful New Graduate Program, hospitals have traditionally been the first choice for the majority of graduates. I can honestly say that my choice to go against convention and move to Central Australia for the twelve month Graduate Nurse Program has been an enriching and worthwhile experience.

I had heard about the remote component and the extensive clinical opportunities offered by Alice Springs Hospital, through friends who had participated in the program earlier. The exciting opportunities and adventures of working within a remote area has allowed me to realise that nursing can go way beyond the boundaries of hospital walls.

For four months I was privileged to live and work in the Yuendumu community, 300 kms north west of Alice Springs. The experience enriched my life culturally, clinically, personally and professionally and gave me a sense of how nursing can contribute to holistic health care within rural and remote communities.

The health status of Aboriginal Australians is believed to be the worst in the developing world, and continuing to deteriorate in spite of attempts by a multitude of resources to rectify this dilemma. The problem is complex and multi-factorial and programs such as implementing a graduate nursing rotation, I believe will go along way towards bridging a gap between the health of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. With these statistics in mind, there appears to be an urgent need to uncover successful working relationships between health professional and community members alike. I have always had a strong sense of social justice and it was perhaps this that drove me to want to make my contribution as a nurse to developing a model of practice that seeks to empower individuals and communities, rather than participate in models that continue the oppression of Indigenous Australians.

This innovative Graduate Nurse Program commenced with a remote area nurse (RAN) orientation that consisted of many clinical competencies and theoretical perspectives of Primary Health Care. The four weeks helped prepare me for the realities of nursing in regions isolated from many health and resource services. The support, education and knowledge I gained ensured I was prepared as an active and culturally safe practitioner.

Once my decision to embark on a remote nursing adventure was in motion, I packed my life, enthusiasm and belongings and headed 300 kms up the Tanami road towards Yuendumu Community. Yuendumu is one of the largest Aboriginal communities in Central Australia housing around 900–1000 people, predominantly Walpiri. It didn’t take long before I realised that behind the desert sand and isolation, history, culture, landscape and opportunity are at the heart of central Australia.

I arrived at Yuendumu full of enthusiasm, welcomed into the clinic by 5 other full time registered nurses and Aboriginal Health Workers. Arriving into an unfamiliar community geographically and culturally, made me feel vulnerable, yet there was always this underlying passion to really relish in my decision to not just endure, but to savour this remote nursing experience.

Conscious of my limitations as a novice, but with a desire to build on my skills, professionally, culturally and socially I was ready to adapt to this new working environment. Hopefully the cultural safety programs set in place at Alice Springs
Hospital prepared and challenged me to think critically and objectively within my nursing role. Without any prior knowledge of Aboriginal/Walpiri culture, I doubt if my stay in Yuendumu would have been so effective and productive. Like any “New Kid on the Block”, it took some time to establish trusting relationships between members of the community and myself. Through time, I was able to understand that much of what I saw within the clinic and community was often an acute symptom of a chronic cause. I was able to see first hand and in a more personal way, than any book could achieve, the ongoing results and implications of western colonisation. Yuendumu starting its current life as a government reserve for Aboriginal Western desert people. The health service today continues to pick up the pieces of this history.

Yuendumu Clinic sees on average, 1000 cases a month, much of which reflects the so-called “lifestyle diseases”. Many presentations to the clinic involved multiple morbidities which from a medical perspective, could be linked to factors such as overcrowded and unhygienic environments, poor nutrition, sedentary lifestyle and so on. However, nursing in this context, allowed for a much deeper understanding of Indigenous health and ill health to emerge.

The diversity of working and living within an Aboriginal community, allowed me to perceive health care in the broader picture, from a primary health care and prevention angle to the first aid treatment of chronic and acute diseases. On a daily basis I would often drive out to visit elderly community members within their distinct skin groups and assist in the dispensing of chronic medications and geriatric assessments.

The beauty of such an exercise allowed me to not only visualise life style conditions, but helped allow time to establish social and cultural relationships with these people. Often there would be time to watch dot paintings and listen to tales of collecting bush tucker that ultimately allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives of this Aboriginal community. By removing the limits and not just viewing health from a clinic perspective, I was able to formulate a holistic understanding of the contributions to ill-health.

Work in the clinic was hectic, demanding and often exhausting, but by the end of the day, a great sense of satisfaction and the valuable lessons learned, would fuel the desire to return day after day, anticipating a new adventure to begin. Skills I attained out bush escalated in the environment, because it was more nurse and health worker focused than in urban settings. The medical officer visits on a weekly basis, for only one or two times a week. Therefore, nursing is afforded much more autonomy than allowed in a hospital setting. As a newly graduated nurse, the potential for learning and developing essential nursing skills of physical assessment and client care are enormous. Phone consultations, assessments and initiating treatments within the realms of a Standard treatment manual, were vitally important. I was well supported in the development and growth of skills such as suturing, venipuncture, women’s health checks and cannulation. Wound management and paediatric nursing skills flourished.

Apart from clinical skill development, there was an opportunity to develop personal and professional relationships with the Walpiri people, that has allowed me to return to the hospital setting at Alice Springs with a greater understanding of Aboriginal people and the importance of cultural safety. The remote experience undeniably enhanced my capacity within the hospital setting to provide safe and effective care for Indigenous
and other remote and rural clients. I had a far greater understanding of the unique needs of these clients groups, having experienced their environments and seen first hand, the factors affecting access to health care.

**IMPLICATIONS**

As this graduate program is only relatively new in its execution, there is an importance of articulating this new vision of recruiting more nurses into the domain of remote and rural health. My four month placement opened up many opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations and allowed for more cultural knowledge to be shared within other work and social areas. The statistics of Aboriginal morbidity and mortality and the urgency to do something positive towards a reconciliation process, endorses the need to develop more strategic approaches to Graduate Nurse Programs in rural and remote areas in Australia.

There seems to be an heavy focus on attracting doctors to these areas, with monetary incentives and other rewards, yet to my knowledge there doesn’t seem to be the same emphasis on trying to ensure an ongoing committed and skilled nursing professionals, in spite of our majority status in the health care services. From my graduate perspective we are in the ideal position to be influenced toward choosing rural and remote practice as a viable and positive career choice. Not all nurse want or need to spend years in the hospital setting before being considered for rural or remote practice. Rural and remote is a highly positive, rewarding, although obviously challenging work environment, which should be promoted as a privilege to be part of. We are not yet enculturated into hospital nursing and routine and therefore are a refreshing resource for recruitment and retention within remote health.

The program has been running for 2 years and already has inspired a significant interest into this field of nursing practice, with one of our previous participants, now fulfilling a remote are nursing post because of his pursuit of the relevant skill and knowledge base required. This program has shown, that new graduates, properly supported and encouraged, can function safely and effectively in rural and remote areas, without having to spend years in the hospital system, if this is not their interest. While a placement out bush is obviously not for all graduating nurses, it is vital that newly employed graduates become aware that remote nursing is a very rewarding, interesting and inspiring career path.

From my experiences “out bush”, I now believe that nursing has taken me way beyond the bounds of anything I could have imagined. To have your senses overloaded with inspiration, stimulation, fulfilment, frustration and determination everyday of my remote nursing placement, ensures that I will return to this unique job one day, with tenacity and sense of adventure.

Although my current graduate placements in adult surgical and paediatric wards, have been successful and just as interesting, I have sobered up from being intoxicated by the vibrancy and diversity of the Yuendumu community. Still I savour those sublime images of the Tanami desert landscape and the memories of many a resplendent sunset stretched out across the vast desert horizon. Memories of my nursing experience and living within a community characterised by resilience, history and rapid social change,
I hope that the health clinic and its staff are able to realise just how much my life was enriched by such this experience.

“Governments have a responsibility for the health of their people, which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures... Primary Health care is the key in the spirit of social justice” (Declaration of Alma Ata, cited in Wass, 1994). Graduate nurse programs should reflect the diversity of nursing contexts and not just continue to see the hospital environment as the only effective way of preparing nurses for future employment. By offering a course that takes the neophyte nurse across disciplines, sectors and services levels, the Alice Springs Graduate Nurse Programs demonstrates a genuine commitment to addressing the issues of recruitment and retention in rural and remote Australia. I would hope that other graduate nurses be afforded the same opportunities as I have been privileged to experience.

**AUTHOR**

**Tegan Chandler** completed her nursing degree at Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW. She has participated in one of Youth Challenge Australia’s community development projects in Costa Rica and has led a work camp with International Volunteers for Peace in Thurwingowa, North Queensland, assisting in community development with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation. She is currently completing her graduate nurse program through Alice Springs Hospital, hoping to secure a career in remote health.