

## Experiences of mental illness and service response in North Queensland and the Northern Territory

**Janet Fletcher<sup>1</sup>, Alison Fairleigh<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Health, NT; <sup>2</sup>Mental Illness Fellowship of NQ Inc

The conversation between Janet Fletcher and Alison Fairleigh will be a ‘must-hear’ for those who, like those two, care about the personal costs and opportunities of poor mental health experienced by people in more remote areas of Australia. Alison and Janet both have professional and personal experience of mental health challenges and of the services designed to help with them. Queensland’s Rural Woman of the Year, Alison has won a great reputation as an advocate for better mental health, including through her extensive use of social media. She has described depression has “a suffocating weight hanging over you”. Alison used a bursary from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation to forge better pathways for farmers and fishers to access frontline health and mental-health services. Her own journey is an inspiring tale of transition from a state of denial and ‘make believe’ to a valuable understanding of depression as a diagnosable and treatable illness. Janet has trodden a similar path as a resident of the Northern Territory and as a health professional. She is passionate about the critical need for ‘caring’ as an intervention that must be seen as a critical adjunct to—and as something more powerful than—standard professional or technical methods. Janet was an Australian Inland Mission nurse appointed to Birdsville Hospital in 1976. Following her work with AIM, Janet worked around outback Queensland before meeting her farmer and settling on the family farm. Many difficulties followed with drought, flood, insect plagues and family unrest resulting in losing the farm. Janet took her family to Kakaringi, Barunga and Ngukurr where they spent 15 years learning about Aboriginal culture and caring for everyone for the whole spectrum of life. Janet is now manager of the Nauiyu Health Centre near Daly River. In 2005 Janet was awarded NT Regional Local Hero in the Australian of the Year Awards, NT Barnardos Mother of the Year and Remote Nurse of the Year.