

Mobile women's health services in rural and remote communities in Queensland

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Dee Wallis was an EN for 17 years, originally in small rural hospitals in SA. She went on to complete a Registered Nursing Degree at SA University in 1990 and subsequently completed a postgraduate year at Alice Springs Hospital in the NT in 1991.

From 1992 Dee spent several years working in a number of isolated Aboriginal communities in central Australia (Papunya, Hermannsburg, Warnum, Ti-Tree, Kings Canyon and Willowra) as a remote area nurse and health centre manager for both for NT Health and Aboriginal Medical Services both in the NT and WA.

In 1994 Dee completed Sexual and Reproductive Health Certificate in the NT both in Alice Springs and Darwin while working in Willowra Walpiri community and thus began the birth of her interest and passion for women's health.

Dee completed Midwifery at Kirwan Hospital for Women in Townsville in 1996 and returned to Willowra Aboriginal community in the Tanami Desert, 350 km north-east of Alice Springs.

In 1998, Alukura Aboriginal Birthing Centre in Alice Springs offered Dee the position of Women's Health Educator to deliver the first Indigenous health worker curriculum in women's health in the NT.

In December 1999 Dee completed Sexual Health and Venereology at Sydney Hospital and was accepted into International Red Cross.

In Feb 2000 she became the mobile women's health nurse for FNQ Cairns Health District, providing a women's health service in rural and remote areas within a 500 sq km catchment area from Croydon in the west, Cardwell in the south, Hopevale in the north and Chillagoe in the north-west.

While in this position, Dee has completed training in continence, domestic violence, sexual assault and sexual relationship counselling.

Dee remains in this position and in April 2010 graduated with a Masters in Public Health and Tropical Medicine from James Cook University.

The Mobile Women's Health Service (MWHS) commenced in 1991 as a Queensland initiative of the Commonwealth-funded National Women's Health Program. The service is comprised of 15 registered women's health nurses and two Indigenous health workers who provide cervical screening services to women in rural and remote areas of Queensland.

The objectives of the service are to:

- provide an outreach women's health service, including cervical screening
- increase service options for women, including access to a female practitioner
- increase levels of cervical screening among women in rural and remote areas who may be socially or geographically disadvantaged
- provide cervical screening information to both women and service providers.

The service model aims to complement and work with other health services, such as local general practitioners and the Royal Flying Doctor Service Rural and Remote Women's Health Program.

Mobile women's health nurses (MWHN) work as sole practitioners to provide cervical screening services for women. In Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands the MWHNs work in partnership with Indigenous women's health workers (IWHW) to assist in meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

MWHS staff travel up to, and in some instances exceed, 500 km from their base by road, air or sea for service delivery to provide women with access to a female practitioner, in particular for cervical screening services.

In a twelve-month period the MWHS travelled over 200,000 square kilometres and provided cervical screening services to over 10,000 women.

This presentation will provide an overview of the service and the many hurdles the MWHS staff face in the provision of a cervical screening service for rural and remote women in Queensland.