

# Thursday Island: a great elective!

by Anne-Maree Nielsen

The inaugural recipient of the MDA National and RDAA Rural Health Bursary 2015 recently returned from her elective on Thursday Island (which was funded through the Bursary).

Anne-Maree Nielsen is a fourth year Aboriginal medical student from Flinders University (Darwin cohort). Before commencing medical school, she worked as a registered nurse and also as an Aboriginal researcher.

The Bursary is generously provided by MDA National as part of its major sponsorship arrangement with RDAA. The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association assists RDAA with the short-listing of applicants.

Here's Anne-Maree's report:

Thursday Island is the commercial centre of the Torres Strait Islands and is located 35km north-west of Cape York and 800km north of Cairns with a population of approximately 2600.

Queensland Health's Thursday Island Hospital hosts 26 general/medical beds and 6 maternity beds and is serviced by a fusion of local and transient healthcare, administrative and domestic personnel. Medical staff are rostered between the general ward, accident and emergency, obstetrics, health services on the outer islands and the Community Wellness Centre, therefore a variety of remote healthcare experience can be



Anne-Maree Nielsen (centre) with a Queensland Health Trachoma Team en-route by helicopter to Moa Island for trachoma screening.

attained and fortified from such a unique clinical placement. The service is predominantly staffed by general practitioners (GP) with rural and remote certifications ranging from GP anaesthetists, GP obstetricians and GP surgeons and is a training post for registrars, registered medical officers and medical students with a penchant for remote health.

My reasoning behind choosing Thursday Island as my elective location was twofold. Firstly, I have always wanted to learn more about Torres Strait Islander culture being that my Aboriginal heritage is so closely tied in with our northernmost Indigenous communities. I took this opportunity to become more familiar with the people and cultural practices of the islands for the benefit of my future practice as a medical professional working in Indigenous health as I know that enhancing my knowledge of the Torres Strait will facilitate a working doctor/patient relationship with my Torres Strait brothers and sisters.

My second reason was to further consolidate my medical knowledge and skills in an environment that specialises in remote health. Presentations to the health services included a neonate in respiratory distress requiring resuscitation measures, necrotizing fasciitis, post-partum haemorrhage, Irikandji stings, tuberculosis and suspected meningococcal disease as well as the more common presentations such as fractured limbs, respiratory and skin infections and chronic disease complications. Most interesting was seeing the medical presentations come through from Papua New Guinea via the local community health services on the outer islands and the management of medical transfers from the islands.

Outreach to remote communities is a major component of the delivery of healthcare services on Thursday Island. I was fortunate enough to accompany medical staff and allied health on such visits:

**Moa Island (Banks)** – There are two communities on Moa Island: Kubin and St Paul's. Travelling from one side of the island to the other highlighted the distinct uniqueness of both communities from the surrounding greenery to the layout and feel of the townships. The post Trachoma screening community meeting at Kubin was to discuss the results of the recent QLD Health Trachoma surveillance which was conducted on three communities in the Torres Strait. It was an opportunity to spend time with community members and to find out the social determinants impacting upon this population. A visit to the local school and art gallery further showcased life on the island and the community's vivid association with the surrounding waters.

**Coconut Island (Poruma)** – Coconut Island is one of the smaller inhabited islands in the Torres Strait measuring approximately 1.4kms in length and in my opinion is one of the most stunning. During the lunch break, a walk from one side of the island to the other showcased a community of

brightly painted houses overlooking pristine beaches. The GP clinic at the local Health Service is serviced by a visiting doctor from Thursday Island once a week and manages such presentations as musculoskeletal injuries, chronic disease management and mental health issues. The doctors are allocated to a health service for a term to ensure continuity of care and there are plans to organise a primary healthcare weekend in the near future which aims at celebrating good health choices. Access to healthcare specialists is via skype or transfer to Thursday Island and routine allied health visits occur regularly.

**Bamaga** – An early morning hour long ferry ride from Thursday Island was required to reach the tropical community of Bamaga. Bamaga Hospital services the local population as well as the communities of Injinoo, Umajico, Seisia and New Mapoon. The Indigenous antenatal health worker provided a rundown of these communities during the transport of expectant mothers to the weekly antenatal clinic at Bamaga Hospital. The antenatal clinic is serviced by a visiting midwife and medical professional from Thursday Island where routine check-ups are conducted as well as link-ups with the visiting endocrine team and diabetes educator. Due to logistical requirements, the expectant mothers are relocated to Thursday Island when they are close to term for delivery of the babies or earlier if there are pregnancy complications/concerns.

The blend of remote acute care and preventative community health in this culturally rich environment made this Thursday Island elective an enjoyable and enlightening clinical experience. I came away from this journey with a renewed interest in the practice of preventative community health in areas of remote locales and having this opportunity to learn more about life on the Torres Strait was icing on the cake.

**Reference:**

Queensland Government (2015) Queensland Health Thursday Island Health Service Profile, Website: <http://www.health.qld.gov.au> [Accessed: 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016]