



Photos both pages...Dr Peter Bennett on location in remote South Australia (except for top left and bottom right, facing page... Dr Bennett at RVTS workshops).

Dr Peter Bennett: GP Fellowship at 57!

After 30 years of practising predominantly in city hospitals, Dr Peter Bennett decided it was time for a change. What followed was an adventure that led him to a new career path and satisfying work in remote general practice. Carl Roe from the Remote Vocational Training Scheme (RVTS) spoke with Peter about his decision to go bush and train for GP Fellowship via distance education.

Dr Peter Bennett is proof that you can indeed teach an old(ish) doctor new tricks. He'd been working in salaried hospital positions for three decades when he came to the realisation that he'd like to do something different for the remainder of his career. The only question was what?

"When I was looking for a useful job I could do for 10 or 15 years, I started looking at Aboriginal community health centres" Peter recalls. It was an environment that would make good use of his skills and a work situation that would allow him time back in the city. He decided to give it a go.

Five years on, the South Australian Indigenous communities of Indulkana and Mimili enjoy a continuity of service that is no doubt the envy of some other communities. "We normally spend around three months in the community and then have a couple of weeks back in Sydney" Peter says. It's an arrangement that has certainly proven to be sustainable.

The Nganampa Health Council operates the clinic-based 24-hour service where Peter works with two or three nurses. "It's a well run and very appropriate medical service" he says. There is a lot of acute medicine, but a big part of Peter's work is chronic disease management, particularly diabetes, chronic renal failure and heart disease. Diseases appear in the population earlier and with greater severity than the broader community, including some illnesses that aren't found in more affluent urban settings.

It's a challenging environment in which to practise, although Peter says that with the right professional support it's a very satisfying area in which to work.

"One of the good things is working with the remote area nurses, who are highly skilled and excellent work colleagues" he says. He also finds regular contact with fellow doctors invaluable, both professionally and socially.



Far from being isolated from the outside world, Peter has been linked into a nationwide support network as a registrar with the Remote Vocational Training Scheme, which provides training via distance education and supervises its registrars remotely. For someone in Peter's position, it's the only practical way to achieve Fellowship.

Initially, he wasn't planning to do the training for lack of time. "I wouldn't have looked at doing it if I hadn't had that support, because I couldn't have even negotiated the administrative side of it" he recalls.

Going back to school after so many years in the workplace was as significant as moving from the city to a remote community. "It was intimidating, as I hadn't been involved in any sort of training program for some time" recalls Peter, who was recently awarded Fellowship of the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (FACRRM).

"The advantages of the ACRRM process was that it was cumulative and enabled me to take things one step at a time. And the RVTS gave me the skills and confidence I needed to practise in a new environment and to tackle the examination and assessment events."

The weekly education sessions via teleconference with fellow registrars provided an opportunity to brush up on knowledge. "They certainly weren't a burden" Peter says. "They were an opportunity to network with others, so were welcome."

His offsite supervisor was chosen for her experience working in the same type of environment and was particularly helpful when it came to discussing sensitive patient issues. And he



found the practical workshops to be terrific. "In fact, when I started off, somebody said you've got to join this organisation, they do great workshops!"

Although achieving Fellowship wasn't necessarily at the top of Peter's wishlist, he now counts it as a real milestone of his career. "There's no doubt that it gave me quite a lift, to get something I didn't think I was ever going to get" he says. "You can say you are not that bothered about it, which I always said, but at the same time it's significant to be recognised on the same footing as others."

Working in remote communities isn't everyone's cup of tea, but Peter says it can be a rewarding career. "I think for the right sort of person at the right time in their life, it's a job that can be committed to and really feel that it's something you can maintain for some time. If you make a long-term commitment and stick it out for a few years, it's definitely an advantage in your relationship with the community."

More information about the Remote Vocational Training Scheme can be found at www.rvts.org.au.

