

Remote Vocational Training Stream

By Pat Giddings



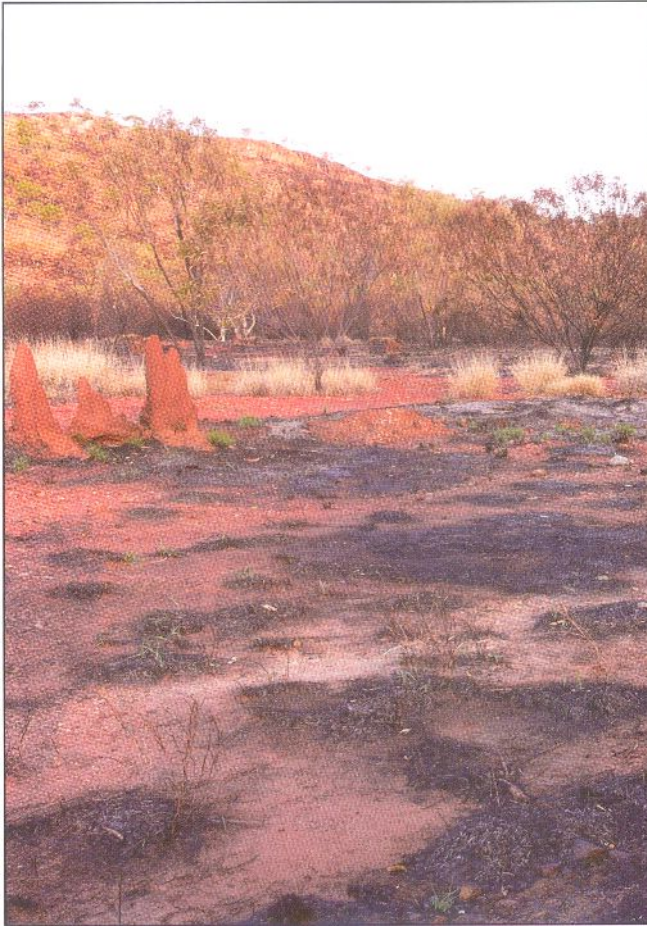
“Sean, Mungindi’s on the phone!”

MUNGINDI IS A SMALL TOWN ON THE QUEENSLAND/NEW SOUTH WALES BORDER, ABOUT TWO HOURS WEST OF GOONDIWINDI. IN 1999 THE LOCAL HOSPITAL’S MEDICAL SUPERINTENDENT WITH RIGHT OF PRIVATE PRACTICE WAS DR CHRISTIAN ROWAN. CHRISTIAN WAS FULFILLING THE SERVICE COMMITMENTS OF HIS QUEENSLAND HEALTH SCHOLARSHIP. A GREGARIOUS YOUNG MAN WITH A “BEATLES MOP TOP” AND AN ENVIABLE FLASH OF WHITE TEETH, HE WANTED TO ATTAIN VR BUT DID NOT WANT TO LEAVE HIS TOWN TO DO SO.

Prior to Christian’s tenure in Mungindi there had been a string of short-term locums for many years. It was only a few years since the provider number legislation had been introduced and young graduates had to undertake the RACGP training program to achieve fellowship and, in turn, VR. Christian questioned the requirement for him to leave Mungindi in order to enter the training program.

After a stand-off with the system and uproar from Mungindi’s townsfolk at the prospect of losing their doc, political intervention looked inevitable. However, it was fortuitous that Mungindi was part of the then Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson’s electorate. A series of public meetings led to Deputy Prime Ministerial influence being directed to the then Health Minister Michael Wooldridge. The Pilot Remote Vocational Training Stream

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One way of dealing with barbed wire fences

The program caters to doctors in solo practice being supervised remotely.

(PRVTS) was established; a program born as a political solution to a crisis where training and workforce imperatives intersect. Eleven registrars from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria commenced the program on 4th January 2000. The registrars came from locations as diverse as Bamaga on the tip of Cape York and Hopetoun in Victoria's Mallee.

The program was originally administered by the long defunct and short-lived joint venture board - the joint committee set up by ACRRM and the RACGP. The PRVTS continued to be managed jointly by the two colleges. In the early days of GPET I tried to explain these joint arrangements to Bill Coote, as he came to grips with his role as CEO of the new organisation; he said: "Gee Pat, that sounds about as comfortable as straddling two barbed wire fences". In actual fact it has been very

comfortable and I think largely due to the success of the model, the demand to the program, and the individuals participating as supervisors and registrars. With a steering group that consisted of such luminaries as Tom Doolan, Sarah Strasser, Elizabeth Chalmers, Max Chalmers, David Campbell, Vicki Sheedy, Les Woollard, Richard Lawrance, Dennis Pashen, and Richard Hays, how could it not be a success?

In 2003 the Health Minister at the time, Kay Patterson, got rid of the "Pilot" from the name and the program became known simply as "RVTS". We took this as a vote of confidence in the program.

The program caters to doctors in solo practice being supervised remotely. It has provided participants with three years of education, including weekly "teletutorials" and twice-yearly workshops with the whole group, including supervisors and families, flying into a major centre for a bit of training that cannot be delivered over the phone. At the time, registrars and supervisors were provided with digital cameras, hands-free phones, a second phone line and the fastest internet connection that we could arrange - in the early days that meant "pretty slow". Early reports described the program as "high tech" but it soon became apparent that the simplest, most familiar technologies were the most useful. So much could be provided by a simple telephone with perhaps a PowerPoint presentation sent by email. Anything more fancy did not seem to work.

The program was not without its early sceptics: "How can you possibly deliver vocational training by distance education and remote supervision?"; "They will all fail;" "What a waste of money." Seven years on the doubters have been silenced. With a 95 per cent pass rate of the FRACGP exam, three detailed and highly complimentary evaluations, the expanding band of alumni have become somewhat of a "who's who" in rural and remote education training and politics. Christian Rowan, the young doctor with the flashy white teeth, is now the president of the Rural Doctors Association of Queensland, having had an unsuccessful tilt at Queensland state politics. His supervisor, Dr Les Woollard from Moree in New South Wales, is now the president of the Rural Doctors Association of New South Wales.

Other notable alumni include Carmel Nelson, who is director of the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service, as well as Andrew Reedy, who is the current chair of Rural and Regional Training Consortium. John Heinrich, another alumnus, is the former ACRRM Registrar Director and Board member of the Rural and Regional Queensland Consortium. Peta Cornwall, an RVTS registrar who trained in tiny Alpha in Central Queensland, was also a Board member, and current RVTS

registrar Rod Martin is National Convener of the Doctors in Rural and Remote Training Association (DIRRTA).

Over the life of the program no less than 32 remote centres have had the benefit of an RVTS registrar (See Box). More than half of the trainees have remained in their own town at the end of training, while more than three quarters remain in rural and remote practice (RRMA 4-7).

It is surprising how much technology has advanced in that short space of time since 2000. Back then, a digital camera was considered very innovative and was relatively expensive. Now they are ubiquitous and cheap. Even mobile phone cameras now have better resolution than those cameras we used in the early days. Using the internet in teaching was radical at the time; today it is considered integral. Satellite phones are now more widely used and even the smallest and remotest of communities seem to have their own mobile phone towers. So, more than ever, remote training is possible.

RVTS will always play a niche role in vocational training. It does not seek to supplant the role of the RTPs, many of which deliver RVTS – like training, and others that will develop this in the future. RVTS sees itself as filling the gaps left by mainstream training, especially the doctors who find themselves fulfilling important service roles in remote Australia who would have had to leave these roles to undertake vocational training. Our newest crop of registrars included at least two Royal Flying Doctor Service doctors. RVTS training is portable and can be applied just about anywhere. RVTS registrars seem to like to travel in their time off but do not like to miss their weekly “fix” of linking in with the rest of the group. Consequently, we have had registrars dialling in from Seattle, Hong Kong, the UK, Toronto, Israel and Eastern Europe. It means that the model could conceivably be applied to other remote settings. For example, the armed forces, where doctors in training are often required to move relatively frequently to various remote settings both in Australia and overseas. The model could be applied to Australia’s near neighbours in the Asia-Pacific and other remote settings such as Australia’s Islands and Antarctica.

The future of the RVTS seems more assured and there are plans to expand the program from its small base of 11 registrars at any one time to an annual intake of registrars with the likely total of 45 plus after three years. A new entity, along the lines of a regional training provider, is being established to manage the program into the future.

RVTS has therefore come a long way since those early days of Christian Rowan in Mungindi. Its place in vocational training in this country is now well established. ☒

TOWNS THAT HAVE HAD AN RVTS REGISTRAR

New South Wales

Balranald
Bellbrook
Cobar
Hawkes Nest
Hay
Lake Cargelligo
Mungindi
Trangie

Northern Territory

Alice Springs
Bathurst/Melville Island/Port Keats (DMO)
Maningrida
Timber Creek
Nyrripi
Yallara

Queensland

Agnes Water
Alpha
Bamaga
Cloncurry
Dysart
Gin Gin
Millmerran
Mt Isa (RFDS)
Munduberra
Quilpie
Theodore
Yarrabah

South Australia

Ernabella
Fregon
Indulkana

Victoria

Hopetoun

Western Australia

Derby
Halls Creek