

Trisha Maroney Memorial Prize

Tayler Cosentino

I started my Katherine placement experience with high expectations and boy, did Katherine deliver. My name is Tayler, I am a third-year medical student in the Northern Territory Medical Program. In my first year of study, I was given the opportunity to spend six months of my third year in Katherine hospital and Wurlu Wurlinjang Aboriginal Health service, I jumped at the chance thinking it would be a great adventure. Whilst the placement increased my skills, knowledge and confidence as a student doctor it was the unexpected and compulsory education and upskilling regarding interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients which made the placement memorable.

Having been raised in the multicultural community of the Northern Territory I assumed I had nothing further to learn regarding cultural safety and competence when it came to interacting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. My first placement at Wurlu Wurlinjang Aboriginal Health service quickly proved me wrong. I spent time at various clinics dedicated to a different aspect of health (e.g. women and children's clinic, chronic disease clinic etc.) interacting with a wide variety of patients all of whom, I was surprised to find, were willing and even requested the student to be involved in their care. This was so invaluable to my learning and I felt immediately welcomed by the clinic and the community. One of the best resources at the clinic was the Aboriginal health practitioners, they were so friendly and were always willing to help. The best thing they could have done was during my first week, they pulled me out of my consult room and got me to hand out lunch to the patients waiting to see the doctor. An integral part of the patient's week, provided lunch on Thursdays (diabetes day at the chronic disease clinic), handing out the food gave me some serious credibility at the clinic. The Aboriginal health practitioners helped guide my consults, made my patients feel comfortable and taught me more communication skills during my placement than I thought possible. Much to the amusement of my patients, I even attempted to learn some useful Kriol words, being ready to laugh at myself helped my journey towards greater cultural competency.

Things did not always go smoothly, however, and I found these lessons in communication equally valuable. I appreciated how blunt my patients were with me, a memorable moment was when a patient told me "you're annoying me, go away". I took it as a compliment that the patient felt comfortable and empowered enough to tell me when the consult was going south.

When I moved from Wurlu Wurlinjang I started at Katherine hospital, where I had the opportunity to further see safe cultural practices. These included an interpreter present during daily ward rounds, close contact with Aboriginal Liaison Officer and long-standing staff who were familiar with the patients who had frequent admissions. I frequently saw patients who I had worked with at the Aboriginal health clinic and these patients were pleased to see me and I believe, appreciated the continuity of care. At this stage of my placement (half-way through) I found that I had built on my foundation of communication skills and was starting to feel like I had found my feet when being involved with treating

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. An experience I found particularly valuable was being able to see traditional medicine working with Western medicine for the benefit of the patient. The use of a traditional healer in combination with Western medication was a lovely moment because I felt it was an example of institutional level respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and traditions.

I intend to take the things I have learnt in Katherine with me as I continue my journey towards cultural safe health care. Next year, I applied to Flinders Remote Package to complete my final year of medical school. I was successful and as a result, will spend three months in Alice Springs learning more about the culture of the Central Arrernte people and then three months in Nhulunbuy working with the Yirrkala and Rirratjingu people. I am very excited about this opportunity and feel like Katherine was just the beginning of my journey towards cultural competency. In the meantime, I am pursuing literature on the topic (currently *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* about the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land) to increase my understanding about other social issues which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face.

I am grateful to all the patients I have met in my six months in Katherine, thank you for teaching me and letting me be involved in your stories. Thank you to all the staff who supported me, encouraged me and guided me in this unique region of the world.