



Life on Nguiu

This is my story of my time in an indigenous community; preparing emergency services for cyclone Craig, a Tiwi footy grand final, 'bush holiday', bush camping with Tiwi friends, participating in health promotional activities, witnessing and being involved in ceremony, and enduring the heat and change of seasons. Apart from the medical challenges, these are the memories that I will take away from my time on Bathurst Island.

Nguiu is the main settlement of Bathurst Island, 60 km north of Darwin across the Arafura Sea, with a population of about 1500 people. All are Tiwi, except for a few 'white fella' teachers and medical staff.

I'm the general practice registrar in my mentor term, and Nguiu is the first indigenous community that I have worked in. I am greatly supported by two very experienced GPs, excellent and highly skilled nursing staff and Tiwi health workers; all who have helped me so much in understanding Tiwi culture.

The mixture of tropical and chronic diseases makes the work challenging. But the greatest challenge is understanding the Tiwi 'world view', especially as it relates to their health. Lots of pathology, but not much anxiety. It has been invigorating relying on basic clinical skills to make important clinical management decisions, especially the decision to transfer a patient to Darwin and how this impacts on the patient, their culture and their family. On occasion, I have been baffled trying to understand kinship, traditional values and the way things are done. At times I have been lonely for my own culture. At times I have thought of leaving sooner, but through my persistence have gained a richer understanding. I admire indigenous people for their nonmaterialistic and spiritual approach to life, the importance of family and relationships. The Tiwi talk and relate to each other, much more than our modern day life allows.

'Bush holiday' is now long over but it was a very special time. It takes place in the

dry season (June-July). The Tiwi camp out on the land of their ancestors, hunt and collect food and sit among family. They return much healthier from four weeks of eating bush tucker: possum, wallaby, carpet snake, mussels, long bums and fresh barramundi. While out 'bush' they burn the land in a deliberate way to regenerate the environment. The spear grass has long been flattened by the 'knockem down winds' and now the cycads give splashes of serene green among the black ash. We are now awaiting the hector storms.

I am into my ninth month on Nguiu and helping coordinate chronic disease management. If I can make a small contribution to the long term plan, then that's great. When I leave early next year, I will miss those sweet smiling faces and their hilarious sense of humour. I hope we stay lifelong friends.

Limpungi
Jill Sass

