

Hooked on addiction

Why on earth would a metropolitan GP registrar travel across the state to train in 'addiction medicine' for six months?

For me it certainly wasn't a passion or even a special interest. It was an area that I felt very unsure of and often uncomfortable with. I pictured days of 'drug seekers' and 'junkies' queuing at the door, awaiting their 'fix' of methadone. I took on the position, not wishing to become an expert, but rather to avoid the poor management I had witnessed for these patients in previous positions.

Based in Warrnambool, the largest city along Victoria's Great Ocean Road (known for its summer surfing and winter whale watching), this rural position has allowed me to learn how to manage substance abuse problems in a general practice setting. I believe these skills will be equally useful for me in both urban and rural communities.

My position has included a lot of flexibility and opportunities to become involved in a variety of roles including assisting patients deal with their substance dependences; research, liaising with local chronic pain management, mental health and in-patient teams, running the acute withdrawal unit at the local hospital, and conducting education sessions for local schools and the community. I have also become a registered methadone and buprenorphine prescriber,

which has added another facet to my therapeutic options.

My own preconceptions have been challenged: I don't see 'junkies awaiting their fix' anymore. Instead I see everyday people from all walks of life, of various ages and cultures, all with problems, but never without an area that cannot be improved. Some are unwilling to change, some are thankful for a chance to change. One of my most rewarding moments was when a patient's mother stated: 'Thank you for giving us our son back'.

I've learnt an amazing amount about addiction and how it affects people's lives; but I think I've learnt more about myself and the way I manage my patients. Who knows, this might even become a 'special interest'.

Paul Grinzi

The Western Region Alcohol and Drug (WRAD) Centre in Warrnambool provides a broad range of specialist alcohol and drug treatment and support services to individuals across the southwest of Victoria.

A survey undertaken in October 2001 of rural GP registrars found that only 6% of rural training stream registrars reported being confident with managing patient's alcohol and drug related problems. WRAD's medical service aims to build the capacity of the rural medical workforce by offering tailored training programs for both GPs and GP registrars.

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