

# Outer suburban practice

## The lowdown on Melton

Located on the outer western fringe of Melbourne, Victoria, the Shire of Melton is a thriving outer metropolitan municipality of over 53 000 residents and is an ideal location for a family general practice. The population growth is one of the highest in Victoria with 100 000 inhabitants expected to reside in 'thoroughbred country' by the year 2011, a quarter of these being children under the age of 17 years. Melton offers its residents a unique urban/rural lifestyle with nearby pristine national parks and forests and Australia's cultural capital less than 30 minutes away by car. Young families in particular find Melton an attractive option with affordable housing, many schools and excellent recreational facilities.

Perhaps Melton's most unenviable trait is its relative social isolation, the effects of which are reflected in the health of the young community. Unemployment, divorce, suicide and depression are up and incomes are down. Don't get me wrong now; the people are generally kind, generous and have great spirit, but the population mix makes for interesting, challenging medicine. The Westcare Medical Centre also attracts patients from surrounding rural hubs including Gisborne, Bacchus Marsh and Sunbury, which are also areas of doctor workforce shortage. Melton and Bacchus Marsh have combined to form 'Djerriwarrh Health Services', a cooperative of practitioners, facilities and services grouped together in an attempt to cater to the unique needs of two isolated communities.

The relationship forged between the outer metro giant and its rural satellite is one of convenience and necessity. The closest public hospital is 20 minutes down the road in Sunshine and has one of the busiest emergency departments in the country, which explains in large part why Westcare is also very busy. Being an area of workforce shortage doesn't help and with around one doctor for every 2500 patients, Melton is well below the national average in terms of doctor supply. The Bacchus Marsh and Melton Memorial Hospital is too far away for Melton general practitioners

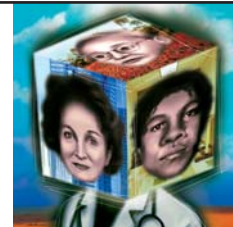
to have acute inpatients and so as VMOs, we admit palliative care and some chronically ill patients.

## After hours care

Westcare operates a weekend and evening service, as we feel morally and ethically obligated to do so. Of course it affects our own personal lives, but that's the nature of what we do. The partners including myself all work a minimum 40 hours a week including evenings and we take part in a rotating weekend roster. It's hard work, but when we consider the plight of our colleagues in the bush, we can put things back in perspective.

## Teaching

As a GP supervisor, I always try to leave an appointment free in each hour so that there is sufficient time to address the needs of the registrar during the day. The life of a GP supervisor is never dull; there's nothing like a pop quiz on a seriously ill patient you've never



**Graham Jacobs**

MBBS, has been a general practitioner at Westcare Medical Centre, Melton, Victoria, since it opened in 1989.



**Figure 1. Dr Sonya Morrissey**



Figure 2. Nurse Robyn Hitchings in treatment room

seen before to keep you on your toes!

We take in our registrars through the Victorian Metropolitan Alliance (VMA). Teaching sessions are at a fixed time each week and the registrar never misses out on a session. It takes 4–5 hours a week to prepare and run each session, but it's worth it. Most are very appreciative of the effort the practice and I put in to delivering quality experiential training. I was both surprised and honoured to receive The Royal Australian College of General Practitioner's 'Supervisor of the Year' award in 2001 in recognition for the group effort made by the centre.

The rewards of teaching can be immediate when you're face to face with a registrar in a session, and you know that you have made a positive and tangible contribution from the positive feedback you get. If you're going to do something, do it properly. We take training very seriously and our success in this area is best demonstrated in our rate of retention with many of our registrars choosing to continue on with us. One is now a partner and another joining soon. The training program serves many purposes and is an effective way of meeting the medical needs of the community as well as those of the registrar.

### Retaining doctors and meeting community needs

At any one time, there are 13–14 doctors on staff and we have been successful in establishing a good balance between men and women GPs, largely as a result of our participation in the training program. Past registrars Mat Hargreaves and Steve Stojkovski have now joined the practice as partners. We have been able to attract and retain several quality women GPs in recent times, thereby addressing a service gap which seems to be particularly prevalent in the western suburbs. Past registrars Sonya Morrissey, Sally Duguid, Emma Rattray and Tina Shattock are now committed associates. Kate Robins-

Browne, our present registrar has also committed to working part time next year while conducting research in an academic role. In order to keep the women GPs on board, we had to ensure that Westcare was an attractive option when compared with our inner metro rivals. This meant creating a harmonious working environment and generating competitive financial rewards.

The challenge has always been to balance the needs of the community with those of the centre. How do we provide accessible and affordable medical care to a financially depressed community and at the same time, ensure the continued viability of the centre? Last year Westcare made the change to private billing after 13 years of bulk billing. It was like changing religions. It took some fine tuning, but I finally think we've got it right. Tailoring the provision of services is relatively easy in a young, growing area, still, you have to keep your ear to the ground and listen to what the community is telling you.

For example, we have focussed on the provision of young women's health in response to an obvious need. Similarly, an equally pressing need for youth health services has seen Dr Sonya Morrissey (*Figure 1*), one of our more passionate associates on the subject and a doctor who also works at a youth specific health service in Melton called 'The Back Door', develop further links with youth services and local schools. Paediatrics is my passion and there's no shortage of kids around here. Counselling is also in demand and we make sure that we take the time to listen. Minor surgical procedures are par for the course and everyone gets plenty of practice (*Figure 2*).

My sincere hope for the future is that we can lift the 'taboo' associated with the western suburbs by continuing to run a friendly, viable practice that provides an enjoyable working life for doctors.