In 1977 Dr Iain Nicolson migrated with his wife and young son from Gosport in the south-east of England to Toora, a small farming town in Victoria’s Gippsland region, to take over what he described as a ‘derelict’ country practice.

After seven and a half years in Toora, the Nicolson family made the move to Sale, another rural town in Gippsland, where it has remained ever since. This change helped to cement Dr Nicolson’s passion for working in rural general practice, after he started his career in much the same way.

‘I did my general practice training in a village practice in England, then was a partner in a general practice in a smaller provincial town,’ Dr Nicolson told Good Practice. ‘When I came to Australia it was completely different, as I went from a town of about 250 in England to 600 in Toora, but it was a fantastic experience, and one that I still enjoy.’

One of things Dr Nicolson most enjoys about rural general practice is the feeling of closeness that comes with being part of a small community.

‘When you’re down the street, you meet people who greet you well,’ he said. ‘When you’re out doing other activities, you are part of a larger part of the community.’

Patron of St John

In addition to working as a GP in rural Australia for almost four decades, a significant part of Dr Nicolson’s career has been his volunteer work with St John Ambulance Victoria. Starting off as a medical officer in the Sale division in 1989, he worked his way up to more senior roles such as the board director, a position he held for close to 10 years, and was appointed Commissioner for St John Ambulance Victoria in June 2005.

Dr Nicolson has never ceased to feel inspired by the services that St John Ambulance has been providing for more than 130 years, including first aid at small functions to larger events such as music festivals and international sporting events, like the Ironman triathlon.

‘We offer a field hospital to support the [Ironman] competition and have some very talented young volunteers who take carriage of that and do an amazing job,’ he said.

Dr Nicolson has experienced a number of major emergency situations as a volunteer. He has found such experiences humbling, particularly during the devastating 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria.

‘St John played a very important part [in the bushfire response] and our volunteers were very much on the frontline of what was happening,’ he said. ‘It was a very difficult and trying time and our volunteers did very well.

‘I have a view that, as medical practitioners, we have a duty to the community that we look after and that is one way of repaying it.’

Dr Nicolson is quick to recommend not only GPs, but all healthcare professionals and medical students offer their services and volunteer for St John Ambulance. He believes it is an empowering experience to be part of such an important organisation that helps to foster connections across the various medical professions.

‘You get medical officers, nurses, paramedics, all working together in an emergency field as volunteers,’ he said. ‘The carry-over from that is, when they return to their day jobs they have an increased respect for each other, and that is very important.

‘We also encourage students to join because when we’re running our emergency response teams, the students get a chance to practise on real people in real time, much more so than they likely would in the normal course of events.’

Dr Nicolson recognises the significance of giving to the community as a volunteer, much like a GP does, and how it can also help to increase skill sets in general practice.

‘[If you are] in general practice, being a St John volunteer stretches your skills,’ he said. ‘It stretches you intellectually and it stretches you in the sense that you have to work with different people and you work in situations where you’re outside your comfort zone.

‘It encourages you to go on the various RACGP courses, such as the Clinical Emergency Management Plan [CEMP] workshop.

‘If you’re a GP, I think it increases your scope of practice.’
Although he has taken a step away from training and volunteering with St John Ambulance, Dr Nicolson still finds time to work in smaller administrative roles within the organisation he values so highly.

‘I’ve served my time as a volunteer, but I’m still very passionate about St John,’ he said. ‘I’m very proud to be a small part in a great organisation and have thoroughly enjoyed it and learnt a great deal.’

Recognising dedication
Dr Nicolson has found he also learns through his teaching, not only with his roles with St John Ambulance, but as a lecturer at Monash University Rural Health in East Gippsland. He feels it is important to pass on knowledge to the next generation of doctors.

‘Taking students is part of being a doctor,’ he said. ‘And if you’re going to do the job, you have to keep yourself up to speed with what’s going on because the students are pretty smart. Teaching keeps you on your toes.’

Further adding to his achievements, Dr Nicolson was awarded a Knight of Justice for the Order of St John Ambulance by the Governor of Victoria in 2016 – just the third Victorian to receive the honour. The award underlines years of service to the organisation and its patients.

‘It was a great honour and a great privilege,’ he said.

However, Dr Nicolson views the award less a culmination of his efforts than part of an ongoing journey.

‘In October I will have been a GP in rural Australia for 40 years and I wouldn’t swap it for quids,’ he said. ‘If you’re prepared to put in, you get a lot out of it.

‘But you also have to give back to the community from which you derive your living.

‘It’s all a journey and I hope it’s not over yet.’

I’m a member because …
Because it provided me with all of the necessary tools to commence work in general practice.

‘I have always found the RACGP to be a very useful resource. I like the continuing educational opportunities that it provides throughout your career.’

– Dr Iain Nicolson, RACGP member since 1978.

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