



The UnitingCare Health team. L-R: Annette Bailey from St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital; Reverend Robyn Kidd; Richard Royle, Executive Director of UnitingCare Health; Wendy Zernike from The Wesley Hospital; and Kathy Johns from St Stephen's Hospital

Nurse training in the Solomon Islands

UnitingCare Health nurses learn from their time at the Helena Goldie Hospital



PATTERSON delivers babies, diagnoses illnesses, performs minor procedures and prescribes medication. Based on a remote island in the Solomon Islands, this nurse is the closest thing to a doctor the small community has.

Patterson lives in the village on Buni Island and runs the rural health clinic like a doctor's surgery. He completed the three-year Diploma of Nursing in the capital, Honiara, and worked as a graduate nurse for one year before being appointed to the Helena Goldie Hospital remote area staff and taking up his current role.

Director of Clinical Education at Brisbane's

Wesley Hospital and the Helena Goldie Hospital Program Clinical Project Leader, Wendy Zernike, said the level of clinical work Patterson performs is incredible.

"The three-year, diploma level, nurse training programs in the Solomon Islands are helping to improve healthcare outcomes for whole communities," Ms Zernike said. "It's amazing that registered nurses who have trained for three years and are just one year out of training are running clinics.

"This very capable 23-year-old has a small ward of three general beds plus two maternity beds, delivers babies as well as diagnoses and treats chest pain, gastroenteritis and pneumonia.

“He also travels to see patients on the surrounding islands, consults with doctors over a two-way radio and is a 20-minute boat ride from the Helena Goldie Hospital.”

The Helena Goldie Hospital in Munda in the Western Province has one of the few Diploma of Nursing programs in the Solomon Islands. Run by the United Church in Solomon Islands, the hospital partners with the Uniting Church of Australia. UnitingCare Health is part of UnitingCare Queensland and operates a number of private hospitals in Queensland.

As part of this partnership, UnitingCare Health is committed to helping the Helena Goldie Hospital and Nursing College as part of UnitingCare Health’s missional work, which is strongly linked to its values of compassion, respect, justice, working together and leading through learning.

Wendy Zernike and up to three clinical volunteers from UnitingCare Health hospitals travel to the Solomon Islands twice a year to teach at the Helena Goldie College of Nursing as well as assist and work in partnership with staff at the Helena Goldie Hospital.

“We go twice a year to coincide with the nursing school program,” Ms Zernike said. “For consistency, we ask our clinical volunteers to commit themselves to the two trips each year to help build relationships with the hospital community.”

In May, Wendy Zernike, accompanied by Annette Bailey, Clinical Nurse Manager from St Andrew’s War Memorial Hospital Emergency Unit in Brisbane and Kathy Johns, Peri-operative Clinical Nurse from St Stephen’s Hospital in Maryborough, spent a week working in partnership with the staff at the Helena Goldie Hospital and Nursing College.

Wearing the “Munda” footwear, a pair of thongs, the team worked in up to 40°C heat and what seemed close to 100 percent humidity throughout their stay. They brought donated medical equipment and supplies from Australia and helped repair some of the broken hospital equipment.

“We spend a lot of the time helping in the hospital wards, gaining an understanding of the conditions that the staff work in, the equipment available and the kind of illnesses

and conditions the patients presented with,” Ms Zernike said.

“The students and nurses were keen to learn how to put a nursing care plan together, something we do here in Australia as part of our role that will now have a big impact on nursing care efficiencies in the Helena Goldie Hospital and in remote clinics.

“Conditions at the 55-bed hospital are basic,” she said. “Other than an old X-ray machine, there were no diagnostic tools or running water and when we were there last year, two out of three of the sterilising machines weren’t working when we arrived.

During their stay, the Helena Goldie Hospital team also travelled to some of the surrounding islands with the remote area health clinic to see how care was being provided to the people within their own villages. The remote health clinics occur around every eight weeks when a doctor, specially trained nurses, dentist and pharmacist spend up to a week visiting the local villages and provide medical treatment.

Ms Zernike said she was in awe of the work that was done by the visiting health clinics.



The inaugural Helena Goldie Hospital Diploma of Nursing students in Munda

“The healthcare teams involved do so much incredible work in the most basic conditions,” she said.

The team was also joined for two days by Richard Royle, Executive Director of UnitingCare Health and Reverend Robyn Kidd, former Director of Mission at UnitingCare Health and founder of the Helena Goldie Hospital Program Clinical Project.

Mr Royle said the experience has opened the UnitingCare Health staff’s eyes to the intricacies and challenges of dealing with remote medicine with very limited resources in a third-world environment.

“We have found that the best way is not to impose our views, but to learn as we work with the Helena Goldie Hospital clinical staff and the remote island nurses,” Mr Royle said.

“ THE HEALTHCARE TEAMS INVOLVED DO SO MUCH INCREDIBLE WORK IN THE MOST BASIC CONDITIONS ”

It’s difficult to get supplies and equipment to the hospital and the remote islands,” he said. “It’s also difficult to maintain the equipment, so we found the most beneficial way to add value is through education.”

The Helena Goldie Hospital Nurse Aide training school started in the 1960s and continued until 2009, training over 500 Nursing Assistants (similar qualifications as an enrolled nurse in Australia). In 2010, the Helena Goldie College of Nursing upgraded its course to train nurses to Diploma of Nursing level to become Registered Nurses.

“The Wesley Hospital in conjunction with UnitingCare Health offered assistance in training nurses in the three-year Registered Nurses program,” Ms Zernike said.

“The aim of the three-year diploma program at Helena Goldie College of Nursing, now in its second year, is to train more registered nurses so they can go out to remote posts around the Solomon Islands.

“The diploma of nursing program includes an obstetric component with a minimum of 20 deliveries at the hospital, which doesn’t happen in Australia, nurses need to be qualified midwives to deliver babies here.”

Nurses trained under the previous nurse aide training program also have the opportunity to do further studies to become a diploma trained registered nurse that will enhance their clinical skills and bring further benefits to their community, however there is a downside to this.

“Many of the Nurses Aides provide for their families and have accommodation supplied by the hospital or clinic they work at,” Ms Zernike said.

“To train to become Diploma qualified, the Nurses Aides would lose their accommodation at the hospital or clinic they work at, lose their wages and have to pay for the course until they are Diploma qualified.

“The cost of the course per year, including living in, per student is around

A\$5000,” she said. “We are looking at opportunities for either sponsorship or fundraising so each Nurses Aide will not be financially disadvantaged while they study for their Diploma.

“We are looking at sponsoring student nurses in a similar way World Vision sponsors children,” she said. “I have already had an inquiry on sponsoring a student nurse from a Department in The Wesley Hospital, so we are now looking at how this can be done.”

Ms Zernike explained that the Solomon Islands had a four-tier health system.

“The first tier of health care for the Solomon Islanders is the nurse aides based on the remote islands, then the second tier is the registered nurses. If the patient’s condition cannot be treated by the registered nurses such as Patterson, then the patient is sent to Helena Goldie Hospital, the third tier.

“If the condition requires more specialised care than is offered at the Helena Goldie Hospital, the patient is escalated to the fourth tier and sent to Honiara Hospital in Honiara, the tiny nation’s capital, and that’s only in extreme cases.”

Ms Zernike said the continuity of UnitingCare Health staff to train Helena Goldie College of Nursing has seen UnitingCare Health staff accepted into the Helena Goldie Hospital community.

“We have learned to adapt teaching styles to accommodate the Helena Goldie College of Nursing,” she said. “It has been a cultural and situation shift compared to the teaching pedagogy we are used to in Australia.

“However, the Helena Goldie Hospital staff are sharing more of themselves and their experiences and the benefit for us to be part of the Helena Goldie Hospital program is we grow as health professionals and teachers as well as to help with the program.

“At the end of September, we will return to teach both the first year and second year College of Nursing students as they rotate through the college for lectures and the hospital for clinical placements. We will be there again to participate in lectures, assist staff at the hospital and once again we will continue to learn and grow from this incredible experience.” PH

By Raylee Huggett

Registered nurse Patterson

