

'Tireless trio' keeps hospital humming

If you have ever had to visit Tokoroa Hospital's emergency department or inpatient ward, chances are you will have met at least one of its 'tireless trio'.

Working out of one of New Zealand's busiest rural EDs is a big job, but somebody has to do it.

Not only does Neale Thornton wear the emergency physician's hat, but he is also the clinical director for Tokoroa, Te Kuiti and Taumarunui hospitals as well.

Dr Thornton has been permanently based in Tokoroa for the past two years, although his history with the town goes back to the mid-90s, when he worked at the hospital as a medical officer.

Following his time in Tokoroa, Dr Thornton worked at Waikato for four years then spent six months at Rotorua Hospital, before heading to Melbourne for 22 months.

But he finally returned to Tokoroa in 2006, and hospital manager Jane Chittenden said the community is lucky to have him.

"Neale is a very conscientious doctor. His family and his work are most important to him and I admire that," said Mrs Chittenden.

The well-travelled doctor could have ended up in any hospital in the world, but says he enjoys his professional life in Tokoroa.

He and his wife Michele are both Zimbabwe-born and their three now adult children, were all born and raised there.

Dr Thornton was able to escape being drafted to war in his home country by being enrolled in medical school, which he completed in 1980.

Working as a house surgeon in the country when it changed from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, Dr Thornton described it as a place of turmoil and following the birth of their third child, he and his wife moved to South Africa for about 11 years in 1983.

The couple have now owned a home in Tokoroa since 1995, where Michele is very involved in the local squash club.

Dr Thornton belongs to many local and Waikato-wide health committees and forums including, the After Hours Working Group, Clinical Directors' Forum and Medicines and Therapeu-



MEDICINE MEN: Tokoroa Hospital's medical team (from left) Karandeep Singh Lall, Stuart Gardiner and Neale Thornton.

tics Committee, but when he can find the time outside of work, says he enjoys gardening, fishing and canoeing.

Meanwhile, Tokoroa's medical officers Stuart Gardiner and Karandeep Singh Lall make up the other two-thirds of the medical team.

As medical officers, the duo are generalist doctors who work at a hospital level and are responsible for both ED and inpatient wards.

"Our role involves independently managing any patient who presents at ED – either completely or to a stage where we can transfer them safely to appropriate sub-specialty services," said Dr Gardiner.

He says while their role is a specialised one, it is not yet recognised as a medical specialty.

"There aren't many doctors throughout the country that can do the entire job, and about half of the country's positions are unfilled."

In fact, there is a greater national shortage of doctors in this area, than in any other area of medicine in New Zealand.

While Dr Gardiner has been working at Tokoroa Hospital since 1990 and is a bit of a rarity as a Kiwi doctor working long-term in a rural hospital, his counterpart has been with the hospital for just one year.

Dr Lall said he was enjoying the South Waikato community and finds the people co-operative, respectful and helpful.

Dr Gardiner was born in the UK and grew up in Onehunga, but says he feels at home in Tokoroa and prefers small towns to big cities.

"When I leave work, I feel a part of the community," he said.

"I find it great that I am not recognised for my profession, but my family."

Dr Gardiner's wife Judith also works at the hospital as a clinical coder, and both their sons James and Ross attend Tokoroa High School, with plans to follow in their father's footsteps into medicine and study at Otago University.

"Our family fits well into the South Waikato," said Dr Gardiner, who is also a scout leader with the Paraonui Sea Scouts.

Both Dr Gardiner and Dr Lall are close to completing a postgraduate diploma in rural and provincial hospital practice.

"The study is great because it keeps us in touch with other rural hospital doctors and stops us from getting stale," said Dr Gardiner.

"Obviously we are both interested in rural medicine and it can only build on

the skills we have acquired from working in the field.

"It has helped me realise that Tokoroa is not alone in the problems that rurality causes, and I get hope from the fact the same problems have been solved in other countries throughout the world so I'm sure we can do it here too."

There are more than 30 rural hospitals in New Zealand, with Tokoroa defined as one of the busiest and has an ED throughput, nearly one-fifth of Waikato Hospital's.

Dr Gardiner and Dr Lall share the same passion for their work and enjoy the people and the challenges of hospital life.

However, both share the frustration of educating and reminding people that the hospital's ED is not a general practice.

"The South Waikato public should know there are 14 general practices in the district, and just three doctors at the hospital," said Dr Gardiner.

"GPs will provide more appropriate care and better follow-up for a lot of the illnesses patients are currently presenting at ED for.

"Many illnesses are most appropriately dealt with by a person's GP rather than by doctors who don't know the patient or their medical history as intimately."



Jane
CHITTENDEN

Looking ahead to the year 2008

After two years at the helm, Jane Chittenden says Tokoroa Hospital is no longer in catch-up mode, but able to look ahead.

"For the past two years, ensuring sustainability of this hospital and its services has been at the forefront of all our plans," said Mrs Chittenden.

"As has reinstating and building a relationship with Waikato Hospital, strengthening our partnership."

So in 2008, she says, the focus must be on maintaining that sustainability through effective, quality and streamlined processes.

"We are certainly giving data a big focus this year, in that we need to make sure all data is captured and managed properly in to order to give the whole picture," said Mrs Chittenden.

Last year, hospital management and staff found they were able to reduce their 'did not attend' rates from 20 per cent to eight per cent.

"That was a huge achievement and shows the merits of correct and accurate data collection and collation," she said.

Another recent achievement for staff has been the creation and implementation of an equipment replacement plan which will ensure essential medical equipment can be sourced before it is actually required at the hospital.

"Hospitals always need new equipment – but at least we have done a lot of replacement during the past two years and are no longer in catch-up mode," said Mrs Chittenden.

She said another consistent focus for the hospital, is clinical development, with all emergency department nurses on schedule to complete a New Zealand Triage Course qualification.

It is also planned that a clinical career development pathway is implemented for inpatient nurses.

Meanwhile district and inpatient nurses are constantly up-skilling to meet the varying and changing needs of the community.

Along with the positives however, Tokoroa Hospital, like all rural hospitals within New Zealand, is facing a rural workforce shortage.

"Workforce shortage is our major battle at the moment," said Mrs Chittenden.

"We have a number of vacancies across the board but we are doing our best to counteract that and have outsourced to other providers in various areas to ensure our community get consistent and quality care."

However, she remains positive for the future of the local service.

"All in all, we are very much on target for where we want to be," she said.

"The management and staff of Tokoroa Hospital have worked very hard for the past two years to get where we are today and I would like to thank them all for their support of our service. We can look forward to 2008 with confidence in providing excellent healthcare to the South Waikato community"



INTRODUCING: South Waikato's dynamic health promotion team (from left) Josiah Teokotai, Iuni Stowers, Mere Karepe and new addition Aubrey Stothers.

Healthy promotion

Tokoroa-based health promoters Josiah Teokotai, Mere Karepe and Iuni Stowers have welcomed a new addition to the team this month.

Aubrey Stothers is joining the team's 'health promoting schools' work, looking at increasing the number of decile 2-3 schools in the area to join the initiative. Health promotion team members have different projects they specialise in for the benefit of their community. Iuni's projects include Well Child/Tamariki Ora, oral health, injury prevention and hearing. Josiah's portfolio comprises mental health, sexual health and health promoting schools. Mere also works on 'health promoting schools', in addition to the smoke-free portfolio.

Health Waikato, Waikato District Health Board's provider arm, has four health promotion teams stationed throughout the Waikato. As a part of Population Health Service team, promoters work to improve the health and wellbeing of the population, with a particular focus on those groups marginalised by society.

Promoters work in various communities to address social, cultural, economic, environmental and lifestyle factors, that impact on health.