

FACULTY OF HEALTH

THE CHANGING FACE OF RURAL MEDICINE

With chronic GP shortages in rural and remote Australia, the dedication of 2004 University of Newcastle Bachelor of Medicine graduate Sarah McEwan (nee Gibbons) in providing healthcare for such regions is both admirable and crucial. It is this dedication which last year saw her presented with the prestigious Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) 2010 Rural Registrar of the Year Award.

A Wiradjuri woman, Sarah grew up in Mudgee, New South Wales. It was this country upbringing which instilled in Sarah both a passion and understanding for the medical needs of people in remote areas. In particular, the needs of women and Indigenous communities.

One of Sarah's earliest formative medical experiences came in the shape of the Mudgee husband and wife GP team. They had delivered her as a newborn and tended to her healthcare needs and that of her seven siblings throughout her childhood. She also cites her father's role as a St John's Ambulance Service volunteer as having a profound impact on her as a child, awakening a fascination for the world of medicine.

As a shy 17 year old Sarah met some Indigenous university graduates who inspired her to take on the challenge of tertiary education. She was the recipient of a special entry as an Indigenous student into the University of Newcastle's Medical School in 2000.

"I had the choice between the University of New South Wales and the University of Newcastle. Newcastle won out as it had a great reputation for support to Aboriginal students. Newcastle's Aboriginal community (the Awabakal people) were very accepting and welcoming of new students to the area. I found that a lot of my strength came from local elders in the community who were super proud of us striving ahead to pursue a career in medicine."

While completing her degree Sarah became interested in the field of obstetrics, an interest which has ultimately led her to her current role as District Medical Officer in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, and Emergency at Port Hedland Hospital Western Australia, via placements in other regional areas including Tamworth, Tweed Heads and Murwillumbah.

The award from ACRRM last year was recognition of her continued work in rural and remote healthcare. It was also an acknowledgement of Sarah's passionate advocacy for the communities in which she has worked.

Sarah cites her Aboriginal heritage as being an advantage for what she seeks to achieve in her chosen profession.

"It helps me to be able to more effectively advocate on the patient's behalf and to educate others in our field about the realities of being an Aboriginal person. I also find that I have an advantage in being able to challenge people's attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal culture, and possibly even be able to alter their opinions in a small way which may, in effect, improve their overall practice when dealing with Aboriginal patients."



It's hard to go past Sarah's passion for her profession. She says that she is energised by the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives on a daily basis. She confers similar enthusiasm to the University of Newcastle.

"I often encourage others who are considering a career in medicine not to look further than Newcastle for its exceptional reputation and excellent clinicians that it produces."

You need look no further than Dr Sarah McEwan for proof of that.

Article as seen in the Alumni Magazine - Edition 1 - 2011 (page 15).

To read the e-book please visit: www.newcastle.edu.au/alumni/magazine.html