Bush heroes inspire new breed of rural generalists

HOLTIE. Cameron. McLellan. Names famed across North Queensland. Rural doctors who have served their communities for decades, revered for their skills and commitment.

There’s very little these folk can’t do. Need a script? An orthopaedic procedure? A public health response to a suspected outbreak? Obstetric care or an anaesthetic — the list goes on.

A student freshly returned from Longreach relayed a conversation he’d had with his GP supervisor: “Mark, what do you do for torsion of the testis?”

“What do you do for torsion of the testis?” was the reply.

And don’t think this is the province of the blokes. Dr Sheila Cronin’s wisdom is renowned across western Queensland, Dr Merrilee Frankish has juggled multiple roles, including leading the Rural Doctors Association of Queensland.

Their reputation extends widely. I see their patients in my city-based practice, often when they are accompanying relatives seeking tertiary care.

“Hmmm, the Lloyd St practice”, “How’s the wet season in Mareeba?”, “Do you see Murray, Mark or Grant?” I ask. Patients are amazed to find that their GP is known in the big smoke — and has a national reputation.

And their impact is profound, again wider than their rural communities. Every day students tell me stories about rural preceptors. Statements such as “Dr Peachey told me this in Mt Isa” and “Dennis Pashen taught me that” have the ring of preternatural faith in veracity you saw when your seven-year-old first favoured the teacher’s opinion over yours. But the influence of these rural doctors extends beyond their outstanding clinical services, teaching and community work. Through advocacy, argument and attribution, rural medicine is on the political and educational agenda. The next generation will be far better trained, supported, encouraged (and, dare I say it, better selected) than my generation ever was.

What drives these rural doctors to provide extraordinary services to some extraordinary communities? How has the ‘community’ of a Dr John Douyere or a Dr Neil Beaton or a Dr Bryan Connor become much wider than their ‘patch’? Why is their influence felt so widely? Two things are clear. One is their unwavering commitment to the cause, their rural community — and by extension, all rural communities, who experience ongoing pressure for health services, supports, locums, infrastructure, etc.

Second, these doctors clearly develop unique skills. They are the active rural generalists once thought of as dinosaurs, a dying breed. But there is hope: the chief health officer recently called for a return to more generalist training. Those of us privileged to train the next generation look to them for continued inspiration — the heroes of the bush.

Associate Professor Sen Gupta is head of general practice and rural medicine and director of medical education at James Cook University’s school of medicine, Townsville, Queensland.

Disclaimer: Professor Sen Gupta is a co-director of the Queensland Health Rural Generalist program.

References