

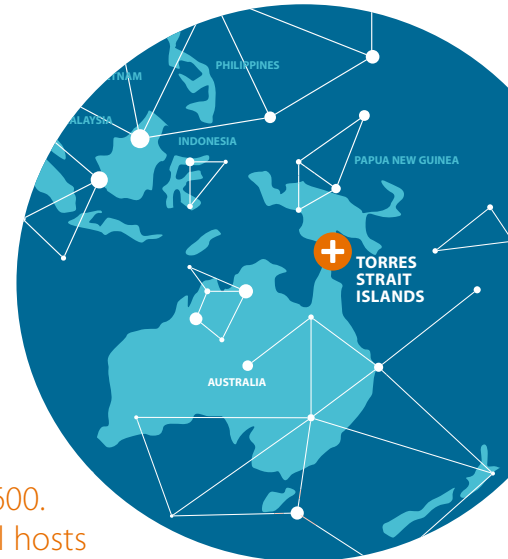
Elective Grant Report



In the helicopter heading to Coconut Island

Anne-Maree Nielsen
Indigenous Grant Recipient
Flinders University

Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service
Torres Strait Islands, Australia



Thursday Island is the commercial centre of the Torres Strait Islands and is located 35km north west of Cape York and 800km north of Cairns with a population of approximately 2,600. Queensland Health's Thursday Island Hospital hosts 26 general/medical beds and 6 maternity beds. It is serviced by local and transient healthcare, administrative and domestic personnel. Medical staff are rostered between the general ward, accident and emergency, obstetrics, health services on the outer islands and the Community Wellness Centre.

The Hospital is staffed primarily by general practitioner specialists and this provided me with the chance to see career pathways for practitioners working in remote health environments. This combination of acute care delivery with preventative community healthcare poses an attractive career prospect for me as it requires the use of a diverse range of skills in environments that pose challenges in terms of remoteness. Indigenous healthcare initiatives tailored to life in the Torres Strait and the involvement of allied health and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers personified the team care approach required to deliver culturally sound healthcare on the islands of Northern Queensland.

My time on Thursday Island facilitated a range of clinical experiences ranging from acute care scenarios within the hospital to involvement in community based healthcare delivery. Time spent on the medical ward and in the emergency department at Thursday Island Hospital provided the opportunity for me to see a range of acute presentations from Thursday Island itself, as well as those flown in from the outer islands.

Medical evacuations via helicopter were a daily occurrence and included a neonate in respiratory distress requiring resuscitation measures, necrotising fasciitis, post-partum haemorrhage, Irikandji stings, tuberculosis and suspected meningococcal disease, as well as the more common presentations such as fractured limbs, respiratory and skin infections and chronic disease complications.

To assist in the prompt management of acute paediatric presentations, I utilised the MIGA Medical Support Grant to purchase a Paediatric Infrared Cannulation Device as this was noted by the doctors as being a resource that was lacking in the emergency department. Whilst Thursday Island Hospital is fully equipped to handle acute situations, patients are also transferred to Cairns Base Hospital and Townsville Hospital for CT/MRI investigations, intensive care admissions and specialist input with the arrangement of these transfers being a systematic, streamlined process.

The healthcare team approach was most evident during outreach clinics to the outer islands and I was fortunate enough to accompany hospital staff on these day trips. Each location was truly unique in its environment, community layout and cultural practices and each of the settings were genuinely welcoming of my presence as a medical student.

Bamaga is a one hour ferry trip from Thursday Island and is a weekly trip for doctors and midwives for the purpose of delivering an antenatal clinic. My time was spent mostly with the Indigenous antenatal health worker who was obliging enough to involve me in her role of liaison between the hospital staff and the local expectant mothers. In transporting the mums and bubs to Bamaga Hospital it was fascinating to see the surrounding communities around Bamaga: Seisia, New Mapoon, Umagico and Injinoo and to recognise their association with Bamaga Hospital as the central health service.





A lunchtime stroll on
Coconut Island



The husband and wife
health worker team at
St Pauls on Moa Island



Thursday Island Hospital
from above

My trip to Moa Island (Poruma) was via helicopter which in itself was a new experience that allowed me to gain a bird's eye view of the gorgeous contrasting aquamarines of the Torres Strait waterway and the marine life that dwells beneath.

I accompanied a visiting Queensland Health worker to Kubin community on Moa Island for the purpose of conducting a community meeting at Kubin Primary Health Service for post trachoma screening discussions. The community meeting was an opportunity to meet local parents and to gain their feedback on the trachoma surveillance screening program. I also had the opportunity to visit St Pauls community on the other side of Moa Island which has its own health clinic and is home to a local husband and wife health worker team who took the time to discuss the social determinants affecting health on Moa Island.

Another helicopter ride to Coconut Island showcased the petiteness of this location in comparison to the surrounding islands. Although smaller than other communities in the Torres Strait, it was certainly no less stunning. My attendance at a weekly general practitioner clinic at the local health service saw presentations that included chronic disease management, mental health support and child health. I was also lucky enough to have a lunchtime stroll from one side of the island to the other which provided an opportunity to see the colourful community and to catch a glimpse of the rich cultural practices that define life on the islands.

Each of the visited clinics had local health workers attached serving as a fundamental link to the communities and facilitating tailored healthcare initiatives suited to each unique community.

A clinic at Horne Island emphasised this practice with the health service run by remote area nurses and Indigenous health workers in the interim between weekly doctor visits.

As Thursday Island is primarily an Indigenous population, I relished in the opportunity to learn more about Torres Strait Islanders, their health outcomes and their lifestyles that are so closely associated with the surrounding waters of the Torres Strait. It was not hard to immerse myself into life on the island, with relaxing strolls along the water's edge, visits to the local cultural centre and markets, and time spent staying at the Aboriginal hostel. This gave me further insight into the experiences of patients travelling to Thursday Island for healthcare at the hospital. As an Aboriginal medical student and former registered nurse, I was also interested in seeking out any Indigenous doctors and nurses working in or around Thursday Island, however I only met one local Thursday Island nurse. I found this slightly confronting as I received many comments from community members stating how good it was to see an Indigenous medical student and asking when I would be coming back to the islands to work. In my short visit to Thursday Island I recognised so many young people and experienced health workers that would make brilliant local doctors and nurses should a viable study pathway exist.

Spending six weeks on Thursday Island was a wonderful opportunity during which I consolidated skills, learnt new ones and met many friendly and welcoming people. I come away from this experience with the revitalised goal of a medical career in rural and remote Indigenous health.

Each year MIGA's Elective Grants Program offers 6 Grants of \$3,500 to medical students undertaking electives in developing communities. Each Grant includes \$2,000 to cover the student's personal elective costs and \$1,500 to provide medicine or other aid to the local community. To be inspired by other past recipients and find out more about applying, visit our website!

MIGA's free Protection Package for medical students provides automatic cover for your elective and Clinical placements. Insure with MIGA and undertake your elective with confidence – complete our simple online Application Form for immediate confirmation of your cover.

If you have any questions, simply contact our expert team.

General Enquiries and Client Service 1800 777 156

Claims and Legal Services 1800 839 280

Website www.miga.com.au

Email miga@miga.com.au

