

The Role of the GP

The Organisation

Katherine West Health Board (KWHB) is a community controlled Aboriginal Health Organisation that delivers comprehensive primary health care to a population of over three thousand people living in an area of approximately 160,000 sq. km to the west of Katherine. We have an administrative base in Katherine, nine community health centres based in remote communities and a wide variety of resident and visiting, clinical and public health staff.

KWHB has taken a leadership role in the development of remote community controlled primary health care, including areas such as information technology, quality management and clinical audit, and structured multidisciplinary chronic disease management.

We are governed by a board of eighteen elected by their communities. Katherine West Health Board is funded by the Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments.

We have four positions for General Practitioners based either in remote communities (or in Katherine depending on negotiation). Our GPs work as part of primary care teams that include Registered Nurses, Nurse Practitioners and Aboriginal Health Workers.

KWHB is committed to the development of multi-disciplinary primary health care teams with sharing of skills and knowledge between professional groups, and a coordinated approach to the prevention, detection, early intervention and on-going management of chronic illness. To this end there is a strong commitment to adherence to high quality clinical guidelines appropriate to the local environment; and support for the further development and implementation of such guidelines, consistent across the organisation and between professional groups.

We are also committed to consistent and appropriate data collection to allow both providers and communities to better understand their health status, to allow good and appropriate targeting of limited resources and to support the development of quality assurance processes.

Essential to quality Primary Health Care is the participation of communities in the planning and implementation of health programs and the integration of public health programs into the life of the communities.

The GP in the Team

Our General Practitioners work as members of a multi-disciplinary team, led by the clinic coordinator, involving visiting as well as resident staff. The role involves direct provision of General Practice services, support for and sharing of skills with other team members and participation in population health programs and community consultation.

An important understanding for all non-local staff is that they will come and go, and what they leave behind is arguably more important than the impact that they may be able to observe while resident. Local staff, especially Aboriginal Health Workers bear the ongoing impact of many changes attempted by short term staff, sometimes beneficial and sometimes adverse. We need staff who are prepared to wait, listen and then work in a consultative fashion with communities and their health services to develop improving and culturally appropriate models of service delivery.

Many of the health problems present in our communities are now rare in the rest of Australia. Examples include rheumatic fever, severe pneumonia, trachoma and chronic suppurative otitis media. The Northern Territory has high quality clinical guidelines designed to ensure consistent and appropriate treatment of acute and chronic illness in remote communities by multi-disciplinary teams, often with relatively high staff turnover. Promotion of and adherence to approved clinical guidelines is an essential part of remote practice and policy in KWHB clinics.