

Provincial O and G: A spouse's perspective

An interview with Christine Hughes, Alice Springs

It has been common speculation that doctors cannot be persuaded to work in rural areas because of the impact such a move will have on their spouses and families. A spouse will have to leave behind both professional commitments and family and friends to live in the country. Even families that have made the transition from city to country life often do not remain because the spouse misses the life that was left behind.

However, for Christine Hughes, wife of Provincial Fellow Alan Hughes, life and work in central Australia has been, for the most part, rewarding. It has its challenges and its frustrations, she says, but that is equally true of life and work in urban environments as well.

Christine did not just leave a city to accompany her husband to Alice Springs, but left behind a network of family and friends in her native England. Both set up a private practice in Alice Springs in 1989, where she has worked as the practice manager and midwife for the last 14 years. She says that it was always a hard decision to leave behind family and friends, but she did have the advantage of having previously lived and worked in Australia.

'I trained as a registered nurse in the UK, but when I came to Australia I became interested in midwifery', Christine explains. 'I did my midwifery training at Bankstown Hospital in Sydney where I lived and worked for several years. I met Alan when I was working for nine months in Tennant Creek

and we later went back to the UK for a few years while he specialised.' While back in Britain, Christine worked as a midwife in Chichester, Bradford and Cardiff.

'I guess coming back wasn't quite as difficult', she explains of their arrival in Alice Springs, 'because I'd lived in rural Australia before and Alan and I were both keen to live in Australia again. We already knew a couple of people here when we first set up the practice. I guess we were lucky because the move to Australia wasn't a dramatic upheaval in our lives. We considered it gradually over a long period of time.'

Integrating in the small town environment

Christine Hughes agrees with her husband's assessment (and that of other Provincial Fellows) that a spouse's willingness to live and work in a rural setting is essential to the longevity of a rural specialist. However, she adds that for the most part, the families of medical practitioners do not experience difficulty blending into a rural setting. 'Among the different specialists here, there are quite a lot of spouses, many from overseas, who have integrated well



Christine Hughes: there are many spouses in Alice Springs 'who have integrated very well into the small town environment'.

into the small town environment. People tend to meet each other very easily and become friends. The challenge is attracting them here in the first place', she explains.

'Once people live here they absolutely love it. Because of the proximity of Pine Gap to Alice Springs, we have a lot of Americans here for two to four years and they absolutely love it. A lot of them originate from large cities in the United States and yet enjoy the contrast of living in a tiny town like ours, and often hate to leave.'

Christine does believe, however, that with the high turnover in medical personnel in Alice Springs, the Northern Territory health services should consider a more structured approach to the settlement of new medical practitioners and their families. 'Alice Springs Hospital does make a concerted effort to greet new people when they

come to town', she says, 'but I'm not sure it's followed through and I think the process could be improved. We make an effort within our own faculty to help people settle. However, because of the high turnover, it does make us a little weary. I certainly think the Territory's health services could do a lot more to encourage people to stay.'

Diversity of personnel and patients

Like her husband, Christine enjoys the diversity and character of Alice Springs' medical workforce. 'There's a lot of networking between specialists and GPs here that is helpful for everyone. Alice Springs has very good GPs and as a specialist practice, we consistently get well-written referrals from them. Because it's a small town, we get to know medical personnel and their families on a personal level and that really assists the working relationship.'

Christine also enjoys the diversity and character of the patients as well. 'You meet some very interesting people, both residents of the town and visitors to the town, both professionals and tourists. We have a friend who is proctologist and when Queen Elizabeth visited Alice Springs in 2001, he was her proctologist for the day! That's something that you would never encounter in the cities!'

On the downside, she does find that familiarity with patients can also translate to 'very little privacy and that gets very demanding sometimes'.

'Patients do not expect you to have time off', Christine says. 'Alan's on call with private obstetrics all the time, so people can always contact him. We've tried to take a week's holiday in town, but that was absolutely impossible. We really have to

get out of town to take any time off.'

From a recreational point of view, travel is also difficult. 'When we lived in England we used to have lots of weekend trips, but because of the vast distances between Alice Springs and other major centres we either have very long drives or fly, which can be expensive.'

However, she adds that overall, Alice Springs is very livable and modern, 'compared with Tennant Creek, which was far too small and isolated for my liking. I worked in Tennant Creek for several months; although I enjoyed the work there, socially it was a culture shock. Alice Springs is quite different.'

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Reviewing rural practice

As practice manager, Christine Hughes divides her work between day to day administration and business operations and antenatal and postnatal consultations. She is always examining new ways and means of improving the day to day operations of the practice and values the opportunity to attend meetings with other provincial doctors and their managers.

'It is always good to attend conferences and to see how you compare with other people in rural settings. It's very reassuring to come back knowing that you are actually working as well as the situation permits', Christine explains. 'Every practice, no matter where it is located, has its ups and downs. When you need furniture or computer parts, the turn around time is slower than it is in the city, but from a service point of view, our practice is very efficient. We can get

pathology results back overnight by email, and are always able to advise our patients how long results for smears and swabs will take. We also have access to internet and videoconferencing, so that speeds up the process. I am always looking at ways to improve our operations, but I think we are managing reasonably well.'

As Alan is partially indemnified by Alice Springs Hospital, Christine says that the ongoing medical indemnity issue has not had a huge immediate impact on the practice. However, she concedes that as time goes on, if premiums continue to rise, the practice might be pressured into charging

patients more for its quality of service. 'Other people, particularly at conferences, are always telling us that we're not charging enough. Alan has always felt that we should be trying to provide

quality of service to as many people as we possibly can. It's very hard because we love the continuity of care and there are a lot of people in town who are not insured. Even when costs rise, we tend not to raise our prices a great deal. We enjoy delivering quality care, but in the long term, as the demands of the practice grow, it will impact on the family as well.'

Although she is no longer actively involved in midwifery Christine still professes her love for the work. 'It's one of my real interests, I love midwifery, so obviously marrying an obstetrician was a good way of keeping things in the family!'

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