

## Hands On Health Visits Brewarrina - An Outback Aboriginal Community

In July 2000, 26 volunteers and supporters of Australia's 11-year-old volunteer group, Hands-on-Health, gathered at a former sheep station near Brewarrina, after an invitation by aboriginal cultural elder Paul Gordon. Brewarrina is a remote New South Wales (NSW) community of 1,500 people, close to Bourke in northwest NSW. It is also noted as the site of ancient aboriginal fish traps dating back over 30,000 years.

From ancient times, up to 50,000 aboriginal people from the tribes of surrounding areas would regularly come together by the banks of the Barwon River at Brewarrina. The local aborigines would herd fish downstream into a series of rock corrals, which they had laid within the river system. The fish were trapped, and as needed provided an abundant food supply to visiting tribes. By night the people would gather around the campfires, dance their *corroborees* and celebrate the gift of life and the earth.

But today, life for many of the young aboriginal people is scarred by the despair of knowing that they have lost their culture and their land. The traditional lifestyle of hunting and fishing is no longer possible without the land. Alcohol and drug abuse, crime and futility are the results of this. The land is seen as their mother, the source of all life, and is central to their culture. As Paul views it, seeing the land bulldozed for farming or dug up for mining is directly akin to a nonaboriginal person returning to their home to find his or her own mother lying on the floor, bleeding, having been cut open by a knife. The intensity of the feeling of hurt and of horror is the same in both cases.

Paul hosted us at Compton Downs, the former old sheep station, which his people have bought back. They are refurbishing the rundown buildings on the property, and are restoring the ancestral lands to their natural state. Their plan is to bring out to the property many of the young aboriginal people from Brewarrina, and get them away from the alcohol, isolation and drug dependence in the township. Compton Downs is to become a place of hope, teaching of their lost culture, and therefore a place of healing.

The land around Brewarrina is a place of contrasts. The ancient rock carvings echo the lives of one of the world's most ancient people, with an intimate understanding and reverence for that which sustains and nurtures life. We sat around a campfire on a chilly starlit night and listened for hours to elder Paul as he told of a 20,000-year-old rock carving of a man whose umbilical cord connected with the earth. The land, he explained, provides us with the sustenance to survive.

Paul solemnly reminded us of the consequences of severing this life-giving cord, an example soon obvious to us in the cotton farms owned by big, anonymous multinationals. These large farms continue to drain and pollute the Darling River system, which is the umbilical cord for much of the east coast of Australia. Chemical runoff leads to liver failure by their early thirties for many of the local aboriginals who gain their drinking water straight from the river. Since aerial chemical spraying of the cotton began, Brewarrina has seen a huge increase in childhood diseases and in birth deformities. But to date, pleas from both the aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities have

not seen a solution.

Back in the town of Brewarrina, we were introduced to the team that ran the Aboriginal Health Service. The clinic is a surprisingly modern and spacious facility, but with only one nurse as the sole trained health worker to provide care to the 1,000 or more aborigines residing in the community.

We were invited to treat some locals. Grace, the chief executive officer of the Aboriginal Health Service, and other health workers, were surprised as the waiting room fills with a steady stream of aboriginal people who have heard via word-of-mouth about our visit. We treated nearly 60 people on makeshift benches, including desks and gym equipment with audiometry, chiropractic, general medical advice, myotherapy, osteopathy and podiatry.

The needs are striking. The natives resemble those of a third-world country more than what we would expect in rural Australia. The health of those in their early 50s is more like that of impoverished people in their 80s or beyond. The legacy of a people disconnected from the past and poorly connected with the present is clearly visible, and affects us all. There was sadness in the town, and we were all affected by it as we returned to the old shearing station.

Paul told the story of the old government-run mission where he was brought up. At the end of the last century, Queen Victoria ordered the creation of missions as a means of protecting the aboriginal people from being shot by early settlers. Aboriginal people were rounded up from nearby communities. But from these original benevolent intentions, the efforts to 'civilize' the aboriginal people soon saw them stop eating their own foods, including the lean meat of kangaroo and emu, fish, native roots, fruits and berries. Aborigines living on the mission were served rations of mainly sugar, tea, coffee and refined flour - all foods which we now recognize as being linked to heart disease and diabetes. This diet and its legacy of poor health lives on today. They were forbidden to speak their native language or practice their spiritual beliefs. Aboriginal people stopped hunting and gathering replacing this activity with shearing, droving, fencing and cotton picking for white farmers. They are poorly paid, and often unpaid.

Brewarrina was the biggest aboriginal mission in its day until it was closed in the late sixties. By then, very few people lived a traditional lifestyle or spoke their traditional language.

"Our people have lost their hope," says Doreen, a community worker at the Aboriginal Health Centre. "Many of us you'll see walking around with our shoulders slumped and our eyes fixed on the ground because we are depressed, and were brought up to feel inferior to the whites. I'm in my 40s, but it was only eight years ago that I learned about my culture. Now I am proud." Paul adds, "Most of the people here are despairing because they have lost their culture. They don't know exactly what it is they've lost, but they know they have lost something very sacred and pivotal to their existence. This makes them depressed and they turn to drugs and drink."

Doreen continued, "We have a shell of a clinic and no trained people to provide services for our community. Our average life expectancy is 35 years; 23 years for the men (even lower than the ABS reports). The biggest age group in this town is five to 15 years old. Suicide, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse are destroying us. Our elders labored on sheep or cattle stations for a pittance or no pay at all, and they have learned to live with the disability of chronic back and neck pain. We ask for training for our health workers, but the courses are all theory. They don't even teach them basic stuff like how to use a syringe to take blood. We have one doctor to serve a population of 1,500 people plus. He does what he can, but it's not enough."

"What can we do without messing things up?" was the question that filled our minds. We were

saddened as we sat on the bus and returned to the old shearing station. You seem to leave with more questions than answers. Around the campfire, someone talked about our shared belief in holism, a philosophy that aboriginal people have traditionally embraced for tens of thousands of years. Elder Paul believes that "we need to work together at the grass roots to bring renewed hope and help to all the people of Australia. That means working with black and white people with a common heart for humanity and the gift of creation." Paul expresses no hostility for what has happened to his people. Only a realization this is now how things are, and a plan to do something to improve the lives of the people.

"We all have a gift to share," said Paul. "Our aboriginal heritage can teach us to care for each other, to share our resources more equally and to nurture the land which sustains us and our children." As holistic practitioners we also have an opportunity to heal and empower people and communities that have lost hope. As part of this belief, Paul, together with others of his tribe and with like minded "white Australians," has bought back around 250,000 acres of his people's traditional land.

Paul's maternal grandmother used to heal the sick through prayers and herbs and massage, but on the mission station where Paul was brought up these practices were forbidden. They were effectively cut off by the sometimes well-intentioned but generally exploitative mission managers. We clearly have a lot to learn about healing and wholeness from the aboriginal people. How can we as wholistic professionals contribute to a solution?

In 1998, Hands-on-Health was invited by the Brewarrina elders to conduct a small massage training session for the Aboriginal health workers. The health workers valued the training and have since implemented it in a small way in their community. A roster of volunteers is needed.

Hands-on-Health has been asked to develop a "train-the-trainer" program in both Brewarrina and other more remote aboriginal communities with a focus on the assessment and treatment of the common muscular syndromes that affect aboriginal people. The course will have a bush medicine elective and have certification. Paul believes that by providing his people with health promoting skills rather than more medical facilities and medication, aboriginal communities can begin to face the world with a little more dignity and hope.

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