

**FROM COAST TO COUNTRY: CARDIOLOGIST OFFERS CRITICAL CARE TO RURAL PATIENTS**

The journey from the Gold Coast to Moree takes more than 12 hours return by road, but for cardiologist Ross Sharpe the mercy trip is literally a flying visit.

The Gold Coast Private surgeon, who is also a pilot, captains his own light aircraft to the remote New South Wales town every month to provide lifesaving treatment to the rural community.

Since he began almost two years ago, Dr Sharpe and his cardiac technician, Matthew Morall, have voluntarily assessed around 1,300 patients, some of which have travelled up to six hours to visit the facility, from as far as Lightning Ridge and communities west of Goondiwindi.

Dr Sharpe said while the clinic was open to everyone, it was primarily focused on improving the health of Indigenous people.

“Due to the prevalence of childhood rheumatic fever in Indigenous communities, the population has a high incidence of rheumatic heart disease, which leads to leakages and narrowing of the heart valves,” he said.

“Indigenous people also have a high risk of developing coronary disease as a result of their increased susceptibility to Type 2 diabetes.

“These conditions can lead to significant complications and, if left untreated, can be life threatening.

"Our Cardiac Clinic in Moree can detect and monitor these conditions through regular, non-invasive testing, like echo-cardiograms, ultrasound scans and stress tests, and prescribe medication or further treatment if necessary."

Dr Sharpe said the cardiovascular statistics for rural patients were staggering, with morbidity and mortality rates sitting at around 50 per cent higher than those in regional areas or cities.

"People in rural communities, Indigenous or otherwise, have a significantly increased risk of dying from cardiovascular conditions than those living in cities like the Gold Coast, simply due to a lack of access to services and specialists," he said.

“The toll of travelling to the city to see a doctor can be stressful and costly - be it for cultural reasons, or due to time spent away from family or work.

“The remote clinic allows patients to receive cardiac testing and specialist care in their own community, which is a huge advantage and ultimately a huge saving on the public purse."

Dr Sharpe said between 5 and 10 per cent of patients who visited the clinic required surgical interventions and were referred to hospitals on the Gold Coast, Tamworth or Newcastle.

"While these patients still need to travel, the entire process is streamlined and they often only need to visit the city once for the operation, rather than several times for testing and post-operative care, as we can provide the other aspects in Moree," he said.

Dr Sharpe said he had been inspired by the gratitude of his patients and the stoicism of the local community.

"I remember a farm hand who, before he got his pacemaker, would fall unconscious, dust himself off and continue to work," he said.

“It is not unusual to hear that sort of story. These people just battle on. They put up with the worst symptoms and brush it of as if it is nothing.

“Not only are they tough, they are grateful. They are incredibly appreciative that we make the effort to visit; and that makes the trip worthwhile.”

While Dr Ross is not the only surgeon visiting Moree, he would love to see the service expanded.

"These people need more than just cardiac care and we hope to encourage a wave of specialists to help their rural compatriots."

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