

Utopia?

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Simon Quilty is a medico and member of DCI-Australia and these are his reflections on his experience working in an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory, and of the Howard Government's belated intervention.

It was an unusually cold and wet day in the desert. An old beat-up car slid to a stop in the sand out the front the health clinic, and the driver drew his finger across his throat and pointed west. I knew immediately that someone had died. We drove in the 4-wheel drive ambulance along the corrugated and slippery road. I was told the story on the way.

He'd been found hanging from a tree, had been in Alice Springs drinking the day before, the first time he'd ever been drunk.

He was lying face-down when we arrived, in the wet sand, his skin already cold. Ants were crawling over his bare shoulders to the dry blood where the noose had left its mark. He was young, just a teenage boy.

I'd seen the look of sadness on the faces of many young men over the previous year, when I'd worked in Alice Springs Hospital. When I first started working in Central Australia I was struck by the pervasive sense of hopelessness that faces young aboriginal Australians living in remote communities.

Surrounded by a world of MTV and Emenem, men's business and ceremony, anger and alcohol, kangaroo hunting and fireside stories of the dreaming, unemployment and illiteracy. So many new influences have bombarded these young people, and the generation before can give no guidance. Opportunity is sparse in the desert, and a clear direction ahead is very hard to come by. It's easy when you spend time in towns like Alice Springs to see where the sadness is from.

I have recently completed a three-month locum position working as a Doctor in a remote aboriginal community 300 kilometers north-east of Alice Springs. Utopia, an outstation-based community with approximately 1,000 permanent residents, is spread out over sixteen communities on traditional tribal lands of 6,000 square kilometres. Two aboriginal languages are native to this area, although many people speak five or more, reflecting the interconnectedness of the people living in Central Australia. The land was returned to Aboriginal ownership in 1976.

There are still a few elders who can remember a time before their ownership had been questioned, who remember the first white men to arrive, who remember being shot at and removed from their land.

The elders have banned alcohol, a largely respected ruling. The nearest police station is over 200km from Utopia, reflecting the very low levels of violence in the community. Petrol sniffing does not exist. People answer to traditional law first.

Every day I was challenged in my ideas and understandings not only of aboriginal Australians but also my own culture and heritage and how it is fundamentally entwined with the enormous challenges facing aboriginal people.

One afternoon I drove out to one of the camps of about twenty people to see an elderly lady who was not well. There had been a lot of rain and I was worried about her as the camp had no running water or electricity, and people slept in the back of a few wrecked cars when the weather was bad.

In the late afternoon of the desert as I approached the camp I saw three little boys all younger than six walking out of the spinifex. The biggest boy was carrying a sand goanna over his shoulder. None of them acknowledged me as they walked over to the camp fire and re-kindled it with some mulga sticks. They put the lizard on the new flames and proceeded to cook it, occasionally turning it over to roast it equally.

Another evening I was called to visit an outstation 30km from the clinic. Driving the ambulance with spotlights on the corrugated red track, I reached the small community as the last of the twilight was disappearing. As I drove in, I noticed a humpy exuding a magic blue green glow a few hundred meters from the four small houses.

The structure made from stick poles and a mulga roof was out on its own in the scrub, and in the eerie light of the television screen I saw the shadow of a person. I was told that it was an old man who had run extension cables to his little home. He chose to live there as he did not want to die in his family's recently constructed brick dwelling as it would result in the cultural necessity of abandoning it forever. This was his solution to one of the very complex and real problems facing aboriginal people.

The incredible challenges of modernity are witnessed every day in remote communities. There was one old man who I had to send from Utopia to Adelaide on a Qantas plane for sophisticated medical treatment. He had been born in the bush "traditional way", and by the end of his life he was embracing the full sophistication of modern medicine, technology and culture, a jump of hundreds if not thousands of generations.

As a doctor, the blurred lines of responsibility made the job very difficult. There was excellent access to top quality healthcare. However, this seemed meaningless when doing battle against extremely overcrowded housing and the infections that spread in such conditions.

Utopia has no garbage collection. The council budget is so small that even the upkeep of roads is inadequate. The Federal Government doesn't like the outstation model that Utopia is based upon, even though research is showing dramatically better health and social outcomes. Rumor was that this was why the council budget was so small in comparison to other communities.

There were occasions where the water supply to outstations was out of order for weeks, as the temperature would go above 50 degrees. Water access is a health concern that most

doctors in Australia haven't had to deal with in over one hundred years.

Telephone services are appalling at best. My dealings with Telstra to attempt to rectify faults or improve services was very time-consuming and difficult, and I was labeled as a trouble-maker simply by requesting services that people had a legislated right to receive.

There is no-one policing the illegal 'book-up' system that is well and truly alive in Utopia. This is an unofficial credit system set up by the privately owned and outrageously expensive general stores on the seven surrounding cattle-stations. When they run out of credit, the people hand over their eftpos cards along with their pin numbers to the store manager who is entrusted to extract subsequent welfare payments to the agreed sum. In the meantime the people move to the next store in a never-ending cycle of debt, illiterate and never questioning the integrity of the owners.

I felt that much more could be achieved by advocacy for these people than by dishing out the huge volumes of antibiotics needed to overcome the infectious diseases that spread in such overcrowded housing. My efforts of advocacy were however extremely frustrating and unfruitful. It seemed as though no-one in Canberra was listening, even when I raised my concerns as clearly as possible.

The problem of child health is certainly the most urgent to resolve. Children with chronic ear disease develop hearing impairment, and are less able to learn and participate in a rapidly changing society. Childhood skin disease is the principal cause of very high rates of chronic adult health problems. And children on communities grow into a confused adolescence that isn't traditional and certainly isn't mainstream, void of hope or meaning, ripe for drugs, alcohol and suicide.

However, child health can not be isolated and treated separately. It is a part of a whole. Disempowered parents are just as vulnerable as their children. As in all societies, healthy families raise healthy children.

The Howard Government's fierce response to the issue of child sex abuse is misguided and is addressing a symptom, not a cause. Overcrowded houses full of disempowered people, many of whom have turned to alcohol for escape, are bound to foster such problems. The answer is not to increase policing in communities where over-policing is already a problem.

Aboriginal people in remote communities need to be empowered and supported in their adaptation to modernity. Communities need to be carefully assessed on an individual basis in consultation with all stakeholders in a culturally sensitive manner. There needs to be a long-term vision for each community that is not forgotten immediately after the next federal election.

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