

MHERV SAVING LIVES IN RURAL AUSTRALIA



PDG Tony Mackenzie

MEN in rural and regional Australia often allow many years to pass without a visit to the doctor. Some simply drop dead in the pub or the paddock as a result of underlying conditions, without anyone seeing it coming.

District 9670 established the Men's Health Education Rural Van (mherv) project to combat this pervasive issue. The project began in 2008, with discussion between Rotarian Tony Mackenzie and general manager of the Western District Hospital, Joy Adams. With Joy's help and that of registered nurse Andrew Whale, Tony and the first Rotary mherv team began by borrowing an old caravan, which they took to eight towns in the far western districts of NSW, including Narromine, Cobar, Bourke and Nyngan.

In 2013, a purpose-built caravan was commissioned to continue the work. It was fitted out with a refrigerator, air conditioning and two consulting rooms, allowing two nurses to conduct tests simultaneously. Initially, this caravan went out with Western Districts Health nurses to rural events



Rob Woolley

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like agricultural shows. However, the nursing staff's varying schedules made it difficult to plan in advance and they would often be unavailable on weekends and holidays.

It was clear a new approach was needed. Then District 9670 governor Steve Jackson was keen to see the project didn't quietly fade away. Adrian Payne, of the Rotary Club of Warners Bay, was enlisted to lead the development of a new strategy and put together a management team.

It was determined it would be most effective for a full-time registered nurse to travel with the project, so a pre-planned route was prepared covering as many rural centres as possible. The Royal Freemasons' Benevolent Institution generously funded fees for nursing services for this year and has promised to do so again for the 2018-19 tour. The NSW Minister for Health Brad Hazzard donated a funding package to

assist with medical supplies and NSW Mazda Dealers provided the use of a brand-new, fully fitted Mazda BT-50 to tow the van.

The 2017-18 tour set off in August 2017 and will finish in June 2018, covering 63 rural and regional centres. Rotary clubs resident in towns along the route have been generously supporting the project locally. From Lightning Ridge to Inverell, Cooma in the south of the state, Grafton in the north and so many places in between, mherv will have travelled over 15,000km by June.

"Because the hosting work is shared among so many Rotary clubs, it isn't an onerous task," Adrian said. "Rotary clubs are always keen to have an opportunity to make a visible contribution in their own community. They are encouraged to 'own' the project while it's in their town."

Local clubs hosting mherv are asked



mherv signing up prospects assisted by Michael Wooller, volunteer 'receptionist' at Speers Point Park on Lake Macquarie, while at a Warners Bay Rotary Club event, Loop the Lake.

to set up local sponsorships for

hotel accommodation and meals for the registered nurse, currently Rob Woolley. They liaise with the local council, police and others for the van's main street or alternative parking in places where rural men gather. Rotarians also staff the registration desk outside the caravan and work with the local media to gain publicity prior to mherv's arrival.

"Because high blood pressure and high blood sugar, for example, don't immediately present with symptoms, there are few noticeable early-warning signs. Rural men put off finding time to see their GP until something is badly wrong, yet many are taking the time out for a visit to mherv for a free check-up. A significant number of men tested have indicated life-threatening conditions requiring immediate attention. So lives are being saved. Many more are referred to their doctor for treatment of a condition identified by the mherv tests."

Work on the project is ongoing. With generous sponsors covering the infrastructure for this tour, mherv still needs to continually raise funds



to cover running costs like fuel, maintenance and the replenishment of medical testing consumables. The management team also need to plan locations to visit during the 2018-19 tour.

"Hopefully this project is going to

become a never-ending story," Adrian said. "mherv's tyre tracks may yet be seen in other states of Australia, and perhaps beyond."

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