

Hands-on Training and Treatment in the Hopevale Aboriginal Community

By Dein Vindigni

In March this year, Tuesday Browell and Dein Vindigni joined a small team of volunteers working with the Hopevale Indigenous community 46 kilometres north of Cooktown in far north Queensland. Dein explains the fully accredited course being run there teaching community members massage therapy and how to run a clinic.

Hopevale is home to various Indigenous clan groups who speak the Guugu Yimithirr language. The community in Hopevale faces extreme social and economic difficulties. The health disparities in Hopevale continue to be among the worst in Australia. Unemployment, life expectancy and education rates are disproportionately low compared to non-Indigenous Australians. A history of social, cultural and environmental degradation over the past two hundred years has left its scars. Elders speak about the pressing priority to develop an environment in which employment, training and an improved quality of life evolve together with a reverence for the environment¹.

Health professionals with empathy for communities play a crucial role in helping Indigenous people to cope with their feelings of hopelessness, frustration and fear as part of the healing process

-Armstrong & Van Der Weyden, 2005

The Elders in the Hopevale community knew of a successful program run in the Kempsey Indigenous community. Tuesday Browell, a senior massage therapist with more than 25 years of experience and a long-standing commitment to caring for Indigenous people, was instrumental in

the success at Kempsey. Following this, the Elders from the Hopevale community invited her to participate in a similar program within the Hopevale Aboriginal Community. The course is designed for remote and rural learning and brings the classroom to the community. Participants learn how to run a massage therapy clinic by working in a practice setting early in the course. The course is fully accredited and incorporates traditional approaches to healing and myotherapy delivered within a culturally sensitive framework.

Tuesday Browell and a small band of volunteers had previously spent 18 months in the Hopevale community establishing strong ties with the community and implementing Phase 1 of this program. Phase 2 will involve up-skilling the existing group, training a new group of Aboriginal Health Workers with the long-term view of establishing a community-based, autonomously run voluntary massage therapy clinic.

Visit to Hopevale

In early March this year, a small team of volunteers gathered at a beach camp at the edge of Hopevale to assist in the ongoing training of health workers, to treat members of the community and to evaluate the broader benefits of these tactile therapies for the people of Hopevale.

The program was collaboratively sponsored by the Chiropractors' Association of Australia (National), the Division of Chiropractic, RMIT University, Murray College of Health Education, Hands on Health Australia, The Massage Therapy Foundation, The CAA Queensland and the Chiropractors' Board of Queensland.

During the trip we were privileged to be accompanied by Dr Charlotte Paterson, a general practitioner and renowned researcher in quality-of-life changes associated with the natural therapies. Charlotte's knowledge, wisdom and guidance were critical in establishing a protocol for evaluating the benefits of chiropractic and massage therapy in this community and for Australians living on the margins of society.

Those who live in the Cape or visit it in the wet season will be well aware of both its natural beauty as well as the climatic challenges of living and working in far north Queensland including its share of cyclones, floods and isolation.

Though the intention was to spend two weeks in the Hopevale community the frequent torrential rains flowing from Cyclone Larry flooded all major roadways making it difficult to travel to and from Hopevale. This reality is one which locals have learnt to live with. The community seemed resigned to being regularly cut off from access to fresh food, healthcare and transport. Despite this, they speak passionately about the beauty that surrounds them in this tropical paradise. Elim Beach is home to lush rainforest, fresh-water streams that bubble up from the coloured sand and is rich in animal life including turtles, dugongs, sharks, barramundi, crocodiles, dingos, pythons and lots of birdlife.

Nonetheless the few days spent in the Hopevale community brought mixed blessings. We met many inspiring local legends including Pastor George Rosendale, a stockman who became a Lutheran Pastor after miraculously



Tuesday Browell and friends try out the massage chair donated by the Massage Therapy Foundation

supervising students but will, themselves, volunteer some time in the Hopevale community.

People interested in becoming involved in or supporting this project can contact:

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Hands On Health Australia (HOHA)

Hands On Health Australia is a charitable group of voluntary health workers bringing health and hope to disadvantaged people. Working within churches, hostels and outreach clinics throughout the Asian Pacific region, Hands on Health practitioners help hundreds of people each week through healthcare, accredited skills training, particularly in remote rural communities where these services and training are not available. Ongoing evaluation of these services ensures that they continue to be responsive to the needs of the community. Donations over two dollars are tax deductible.

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(Endnotes)

1 Living with the Land, People, 2005

surviving a bite from a Taipan snake. Pastor George has lived and worked in Hopevale for more than 55 years. He speaks openly about the well-meaning but often misguided intentions of many missionaries who mistakenly believed that 'Aboriginal people had no spirituality'. Pastor George preaches in both Guugu Yimithirr and English. He conveys the message of the Gospels via dreamtime stories that depict the messages of peace, forgiveness, tolerance and a reverence for each other and all of creation. Pastor George talked about seeing people's hearts rather than their colour and recognising their gifts beyond their weaknesses.

His advice in this work was akin to the words of other elders: to acknowledge the wisdom and the needs of those who have traditionally lived in harmony with all of creation and to listen and learn from each other in shaping a more hopeful future.

Chiropractic and massage therapy have been well-received by this community. Elder and renowned artist, 'Uncle' Roy McIvor described it as one of the missing links to his people's health and wellbeing.

Buried in Hopevale cemetery is anthropologist and chiropractor Dr Herikk De Charette. Dr De Charette dedicated much of his professional life to recording the culture of the Guugu Yimithirr language group. He was deeply respected

by the community and believed that chiropractic was a vital link in their rediscovering health and wholeness.

'Uncle' Roy and his wife 'Aunty' Thelma are strong proponents of tactile therapies including massage and chiropractic. They relay that many people in the community have had negative experiences of touch yet they believe that hands-on therapies are central in helping reverse some of the damaging effects of physical and emotional stress. Roy and Thelma McIvor have been supportive of this program from the outset and together with the Council of Elders have strongly endorsed both the training of health workers in massage therapy and the provision of chiropractic and massage in the community. Evaluating the potential benefits of this treatment/training program will potentially raise awareness about the work and resources to sustain and develop the program further.

In planning the new hospital, the Hopevale council of elders have asked for treatment rooms to accommodate a chiropractor, osteopath and a massage therapist in their new hospital. The plan has the approval of local government and it is our shared hope to assist the community in realising this dream.

We hope to establish a roster of local practitioners who will not only assist the initiative as it evolves in terms of