

Mooroopna, Victoria

## RUMBALARA HEALTH SERVICE

*Rumbalara Health Service* has come a long way since it first opened the doors in 1981 with a staff of four, including one doctor. Located outside Mooroopna, Central Victoria, on the banks of the Goulburn River at the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative, the Medical Centre is a focal point of the parent organisation. *Rumbalara Health Service* now employs 44 staff and hosts 13 visiting specialists. Most of the staff are local Aboriginal people. While offering excellent medical and support services to the local Indigenous and wider community, *Rumbalara* also nurtures staff, providing many training opportunities. The organisation continues to grow in size and professionalism with its eyes firmly set on providing its core business of

### The Story So Far . . .

In 1958, the Aboriginal Welfare Board and Housing Commission erected ten prefabricated, concrete houses to temporarily help house 300 Aboriginal people living on the banks of the Goulburn River. The project was named Rumbalara. By 1969, most families had been re-housed and with no further use, Rumbalara closed. In the early 1970's, the Goulburn Murray Aboriginal Co-operative opposed an outside sale of the complex and eventually purchased Rumbalara from the government for a nominal sum. Two of the old houses became reception and surgery for an outreach medical service, which operated one day per week. This service was extremely busy and in the late 1970's, a report by Dr Ian Wronski confirmed the need for a clinic. In 1981, the original Rumbalara Medical Clinic was established with government funding.

## Building The Future Through Enterprise –

### Stories of Successful Enterprises and Entrepreneurs

From the beginning, *Rumbalara Health Service* focused on making medical care easily accessible to community members. Lack of transport was identified early on as a difficulty for prospective patients. A driver was one of the early team. Transport is still a problem today, but now two drivers, using two small buses, deliver a steady stream of patients to the three full time GPs and the many visiting specialists. The original clinic has in turn been replaced with one bigger and better, but as Manager Sharon Charles says – *'We still didn't build big enough to cope with the present and growing demands.'*

Not only has the building grown, but so have the services that *Rumbalara Health Service* delivers. 21 full time staff and 13 visiting specialists provide the central medical services to a large Indigenous and non-Indigenous patient list. *Rumbalara Health Service* has grown to provide a number of subsidiary programs which entail a further full time staff of 23. There are also two additional locations in nearby Shepparton.

The majority of staff are women. As Executive Manager of *Rumbalara Health Service*, Sharon Charles states, - *'In the Koorie community, the women are often the leaders. The majority of participants at health meetings, at all levels, are women. Women are nurturers and health is a nurturing skill.'* One of the challenges facing the business is coping with patient numbers. In 2001, the only other bulk-billing clinic in the Shepparton region ceased offering that service. Many patients transferred to *Rumbalara Health Service*. Maintaining its commitment to bulk-billing, in 2004 *Rumbalara Health Service* regretfully decided to close its books to any new patients, unless they were Indigenous.

From the outset, *Rumbalara Health Service* has worked to establish partnerships with outside bodies that can help identify needs and deliver services. They have not been afraid to take on pilot projects, which often lead to ongoing services. They have worked on a number of research projects with academics, which in turn have given valuable data for use in support of funding submissions and to provide directions for projects. They have now established a great working relationship with Melbourne University's Department of Rural Health, which sees trainee doctors and visiting specialist visit the clinic on a regular basis. Justin Mohamed, former Chief Executive Officer of Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd voiced this philosophy of the organisation in the 2001 Annual Report –

*'Rumbalara Health Service has continued to ensure that the important ingredient of networking and developing partnerships with external Aboriginal and mainstream Agencies remains a high priority.'*

*Rumbalara Health Service* has a strong forward planning policy, are not afraid to embrace change and in 2001 a five year strategic plan was mapped. In 2002, *Rumbalara Health Service* was successful in being accredited with the Australian General Practice Accreditation Limited, one of the few Aboriginal Health providers in Australia with this status.

## The Impact

Access to top quality medical help and support services are now available to local Indigenous people. Users of the service feel comfortable with the user friendly and non intimidating environment. This is enhanced by the fact that many of the staff are Indigenous. Transport is provided if necessary. Patients are attending sooner, rather than later, and ongoing treatment is available.

As well as the prime service of medical attention, other services offered by *Rumbalara Health Service* include –

- a dental clinic established in 2003, which provides full dental services five days per week;
- a regional hearing program established in 1997, which conducts hearing screening for all Indigenous people in the Central and Northeast regions of Victoria;
- a diabetes program which provides support in diabetes education, management strategies and client reviews as well as cooking demonstrations and exercise programs;
- a Miminis and Burri program for expectant and new mothers and a new program *'Women's Business'* which greatly enhances the attendance rate of women and prevents the chances of cervical cancer;
- *'Heart Health'*, a research project with a number of external partners;

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- Woongi emotional and spiritual well-being initiative which provided support, assessment, referral and advice to over 900 community members in 2004. It incorporates the Woongi Youth Respect Program;
- a *'Stolen Generations/Bringing Them Home'* project which involves organising gatherings for healing stories, visits to record keeping places. In 2004, *Rumbalara Health Service* renovated one of the original Rumbalara houses, named Niranoma Gundja – Rainbow House which will house photos and resources from the past;
- a drug and alcohol program; and
- an innovative health service targeting homeless young people.

The range of programs offered not only means care is available, but also the availability of interesting work and training opportunities for many Aboriginal people. This, though, has its problems – *'I'm pulling my hair out trying to replace receptionists,'* said Sharon. *'There is high unemployment, but where are they?'* Part of the problem is lack of confidence amongst prospective Indigenous employees, despite the supportive environment of *Rumbalara Health Service*. It is a busy work environment, which many find intimidating. To overcome this, *Rumbalara Health Service* employ a number of CDEP participants, topping up wages to full time hours. This enables extra staff to be employed, which gives support, back up and time for training and most important, time to gain confidence in the position. Training to full competency can take months or years, depending on the individual.

As part of their training, many of the staff are given short term placements in supportive mainstream businesses. However, this too can have a down side, when that business needs replacement staff, they often look to the work experience person. *'The organisation is growing, but the skilling of our people isn't growing with it,'* Sharon explains. *'We are training our people and they are moving on because we don't have the funding to pay them mainstream wages. Security for me is keeping them on a salary that is competitive. It's the attraction of the dollars that tempts them away.'*

## Success Factors

*Rumbalara Health Service* has identified six critical success factors.

### *Partnerships*

Strong connections and partnerships have been forged with many organisations including Goulburn Valley Health, Goulburn Valley Division of General Practices, Goulburn Ovens Women's Health, Koorie Health Partnership Committee and both the Victorian and National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations. Staff have served in senior board capacities on both of these latter two organisations. A partnership with the University of Melbourne Department of Rural Health sees medical students on rural module placement at *Rumbalara Health Service* three days per week. *Rumbalara Health Services'* connection with Goulburn Valley Health and the University means an extra dental chair and funding for a new dental premise at *Rumbalara*. These and other networks ensure strong support when needed.

### *Outstanding Customer Service*

*Rumbalara Health Services'* programs and services are planned to give optimum customer service and are driven by the desire to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People have appropriate access to all medical care. Many community people are not comfortable with mainstream services, but interaction with partners ensures that culturally appropriate care is available in all sectors of health care. Visiting specialists come on a regular basis and *Rumbalara Health Service* staff provide support to patients. The child's play room at the clinic relieves stress while waiting for attention and the team of medical patient drivers ensures transportation is available to all programs. *Rumbalara Health Services'* commitment to bulk billing and a no 'add ons' policy means that financial constraints do not limit medical care.

### ***Community Employment Development Program (CDEP)***

CDEP has enabled *Rumbalara Health Service* to carry more staff and offer more training. It means they have the luxury of having back up and allowing workers to grow with the job and build their confidence. *‘If the government took CDEP funding away from our community, it will be devastating for our organisations. We simply could not provide our range of services. It would be impossible,’* says Sharon Charles.

#### **SUCCESS FACTORS**

- Partnerships
- Outstanding Customer Service
- CDEP
- Employing Locals & Offering Training
- Reporting Requirements of OATSIH
- Willing ness to Take on Pilot Projects

### **Employing Locals & Offering Training**

*Rumbalara Health Service* has a very strong policy of employing local Indigenous staff and offering accredited training. All managers and senior staff are encouraged to do a Diploma of Business, ensuring a continuity of skilled personal at senior level. However, training is not restricted to senior levels but all through the organisation employees are expanding skills to match roles. A great illustration of staff development is within the dental clinic. As Sharon Charles states – *‘We are very proud of the fact that we have trained two dental assistants from our community. Their career won’t stop there – they are looking to further specialise.’*

Training is a double-edged sword. The better training and more opportunities to connect with mainstream, the more likely they are to lose staff. *‘I want to use Rumbalara as a training ground, but I would like staff to stay two – five years. I want Aboriginal faces behind reception in hospitals and as nurses. I dream to see Aboriginals confident and trained and working in mainstream,’* says Sharon Charles.

### ***Reporting Requirement of Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH)***

OATSIH have provided an excellent set of guidelines which is a valuable planning and evaluation tool. *‘The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health has an excellent*

*and stringent reporting requirement. It is all based on action plans and measurable outcomes and categorises risk. This helps us take control of our business. We are on the lowest rank – a credit to our administration and organisational skills,’ says Sharon Charles.*

### ***Willingness to Take on Pilot Projects***

*Rumbalara Health Service* today provides an immense range of services. It has had a tradition of initiating pilot projects. This has enabled *Rumbalara Health Service* to build up resources, networks and have the ability to apply for, and administer diverse and ongoing programs.

## **Advice to other Indigenous people contemplating the enterprise option**

According to Sharon Charles –

*‘Know what your vision is and try to think a number of years ahead. For example, if you know you want two doctors, plan for three! When designing buildings, don’t think small, always go bigger than what you need. Allow in the planning for expansion and don’t forget that storage and file rooms are important. Keep looking for new opportunities. Work to build strong partnerships and encourage training among staff members at all levels.’*

## **For Further Information**

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