



The Night Owls

STORY HELEN ELLIS, CALVARY MATER NEWCASTLE

It's late at night and an ambulance has delivered a patient to the hospital, the patient has deliberately poisoned themselves with a potentially lethal concoction of prescription drugs, time is of the essence...

For Professor Ian Whyte, Director of Clinical Toxicology and Pharmacology at Calvary Mater Newcastle, and his team of four, dealing with this scenario is all in a day's work.

This highly acclaimed team of toxicologists at the Mater, look after patients that are admitted with deliberate, recreational, accidental or other self-poisoning, as well as venomous snake and spider bites.

The department, boasting a proud history of research and excellence in toxicology, has an enviable reputation among its peers and throughout the world with talented and knowledgeable staff constantly researching and challenging areas in toxicology, with the overall aim of improving patient outcomes.

On 13 January 1987, the Royal Newcastle Hospital officially opened the doors of its toxicology department to treat its first patient; this person was the first of many who have been rushed through the department's doors in order to receive lifesaving

treatment. From January 1991, when it took on an Area role, the department has been based at Calvary Mater Newcastle.

To date the toxicology department has treated over 18,000 patients living in the Hunter and Newcastle area and is the busiest toxicology service in the country. What's more, the most common patient admission into the Mater is for treatment of poisoning, not cancer as many might expect.

Ian says, "I feel very privileged to have been a part of the Mater toxicology team since its inception. When the department opened in 1987 it was one of the first toxicology departments in Australia and as it stands today, we are still the largest."

The majority of toxicology patients are admitted into hospital during the hours of 6pm to 2am, with an average of three patients being admitted each night. This equates to the Mater staff treating approximately 900 to 1,000 toxicology patients per year, which is no mean feat!

"The night is typically the busiest time for our patients to be admitted. Our doctors and nurses in Intensive Care, the Emergency Department and Ward 4C all have expertise in dealing with poisoned patients, which is essential when we are faced with this normal nightly deluge," Ian says.

"If no other complications occur, our patients are generally only in hospital for a short period of time – 13 hours being a typical average; however the aftercare service provided by the Mater, particularly the psychiatric team, is pivotal for a patient's successful recovery."

Not one to rest on its laurels, the team developed 'Postcards from the Edge', a project focusing on the recovery of survivors of attempted suicide. The project, started over 10 years ago, is a means of communication to patients that had been admitted to the Mater due to deliberate self-poisoning.

A simple blue postcard, complete with jolly spotty dog and caring words, is sent from the toxicology department, in a plain envelope, to the patient.

With 60 per cent of the department's patients being female, the postcard has been shown to particularly help women in their recovery by inspiring a sense of connectedness and showing that someone cares about their health and recovery.

In fact, the postcards have been so effective in encouraging patients that it is estimated that the project has saved approximately 2,000 bed days in the psychiatric hospital over the past five years, indicating that a simple gesture goes a long way!

The clinicians in the department provide a 24:7 Hunter and New England Health on call service and also contribute to the National Poisons Information Service roster. This national on call telephone service consists of a close knit group of the top Australian toxicologists who provide specialist advice after hours for health practitioners throughout Australia and Papua New Guinea.

As if juggling a day job and being on call to the National Poisons Information Service isn't enough, Ian can also be on call during the day to the NSW Poisons Centre. It is just as well that Ian admits to being somewhat of a night owl as due to the nature of his job he and his team are regularly on call around the clock. It would seem that disturbed sleep pretty much comes with the job!

One of the toxicology department's strings to its bow is its Hunter Area Toxicology Database (HATS) that Ian developed from scratch in 1986. This database holds a record of every toxicology patient ever treated by the team at the Royal Newcastle Hospital and now at the Mater, from 1987 to current. It captures a wealth of patient information including: age, gender, marital status, locality, length of stay, psychiatric diagnosis, drugs ingested, to name but a few, all of which are used by the team as a source of research.

Over the subsequent years, Ian has made numerous modifications and adjustments, leading the database to be recognised as a unique resource both for its content and design. Ian comments, "When starting out in this area of health care I realised that there was a lack of good research in toxicology, which provided me with the stimulus to carry out this ongoing research. The database has now become a source of information for toxicologists and pharmaceutical companies throughout the world and over the years the database has contributed to over 300 scientific publications."

The database has a dedicated part-time team inputting the data, including Ian's wife.

"The database relies on donations to fund the necessary data input. At present we have enough funds to keep going until 30 June 2013 but after that the funds stop. It is a worry, donations are desperately needed," Ian says.

Whilst the database is no longer alone in this domain of research, it still remains the most comprehensive database in the world in its expertise and the need for it to continue to receive funding and donations is of critical importance.

With the team relentlessly dealing with 'life and death' situations, they would be forgiven for being a sombre lot, but instead I'm greeted with cheerful smiles and copious amounts of enthusiasm.

Ian even had a cartoon, resulting from a piece of research concerning whether public holidays might cause undue stress with the answer being a resounding 'no', printed in the Sydney Herald. This light hearted cartoon stating 'It's official: Public holidays are good for your health' with a man commenting "I wouldn't be caught dead at work today!" is a refreshing glimpse into the department's spirit!

Curiosity leads me to ask Ian whether a fixation on spiders and snakes led him to his career choice, Ian smiles, "That is a question toxicologists are commonly asked, in my instance it is a 'no'. I simply had a desire to research different types of drugs and their effects and to use this information to find the best way to treat patients."

Judging by the number of accolades Ian has collected over his career this is an area he excels in. With Ian recently being awarded Fellowships in both the American Academy of Clinical Toxicology (FAACT), Ian is the first Australian to receive this Fellowship, and American College of Medical Toxicology (FACMT). The Fellowships are in recognition of his work in Clinical Toxicology practice, research and education.

When Ian does get a breather from his work, the Merewether resident can be found swinging his club on a golf course or playing his baroque recorder in a small chamber music group. Although one would guess that his telephone is always firmly planted in his pocket!

And right on cue, Ian's mobile rings and it is yet another call from the NSW Poisons Centre, with a doctor on the phone looking for advice and expertise from Ian in order to treat a patient. It seems a toxicologist's work is never done...

Below: Professor Ian Whyte with one of his colleagues Felicity Prior, Director, Hunter Drug Information Service.

