

The nurse practitioner role comes to North Queensland

The Townsville Hospital Neonatal Unit is based in the capital of North Queensland, Australia's largest tropical beachside city with its blue skies, golden sand, warm nights, green rainforest, fascinating outback and great people.

The unit is the only level III tertiary referral centre for newborns outside Brisbane. It is a 30 cot unit and of these cots, 10 are for ventilated newborns with the other 20 in the special care nursery. The service includes the care of premature babies, babies requiring surgery for congenital abnormalities and term infants requiring ventilation for various reasons.

The hospital has its own growth and developmental clinic, but with more than 50% of babies going home to locations spread across an area one and half times that of France, extended outreach facilities and a comprehensive transport service are vital. Follow-up services are provided by clinics in McKay, Cairns and Mount Isa and outreach clinics are run by the outreach paediatrician.

The Royal Flying Doctor service (RFDS), which the unit relies on heavily, was established in 1928 as the first comprehensive aero medical organisation in the world, 74% of unit retrievals are by aeroplane, 15% by road and 11% by helicopter.

Right: Special care nurses on the Townsville NICU, Amy, Sharlene and Bev.

RFDS fixed-wing planes perform 74% of the unit's retrievals.



In January 2005 Townsville hospital embarked on a new venture with the commencement of the state's first nurse practitioner (NP) demonstration project in the neonatal unit. A second community outreach midwifery NP is to begin shortly.

The NP role is a relatively new concept to Australian healthcare services, the first such project began in 1990 with various models now being implemented across the country.

In 2003 Queensland Health conducted trials at four sites and Health Minister Gordan Nuttall concluded that the first phase of NP trials had determined that highly skilled nurses have been favourably received by the trial sites.

For Jackie Smith, who is part of the neonatal clinical team in the NICU, the



FOCUS ON A UNIT

SUBMITTED BY Jackie Smith



NICU clinical nurse Donna Budge, consultant neonatologist Dr Gary Alcock and NNP Jackie Smith.

start of the NP duties at the beginning of January brought closer collaboration with the clinical team comprising neonatologists, registrars, nursing director, unit managers and registered nurses.

Jackie is now an integral part of the neonatal medical team, carrying out an expanded role which includes prescribing medicine, ordering diagnostic imaging, audiology or laboratory tests, referring patients directly to specialists and admitting patients to the unit.

Much of her work is with babies in the intensive care and special care nurseries, but she is also present as required in the birthing suite or theatre during premature or difficult births. She also has an important teaching role on the unit.

In addition Jackie is on-call for infant aero-medical retrievals over an area which extends from Mackay in the south to Thursday Island in the north and west to Mount Isa, with responsibility for in-flight and continuing care after the retrieval.

For the future, Jackie intends to strengthen the NP position at Townsville NICU by gaining endorsement from the QNC and organising the implementation of the STABLE course in north Queensland.

Is your unit special?

Why not contribute to our focus on a unit feature?
Contact kate@infantgrapevine.co.uk