Mackay Hospital and Health Service

THE ROUNDS

February to April 2026



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Decade of Deadly Choices | 28



A vibrant community event in April celebrated 10 years of Deadly Choices and empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Mackay region.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians

We respect and honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future.
We acknowledge the stories, traditions and living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on this land and commit to building a brighter future together.

Bowen – Juru People **/** *Cannonvale – Ngaro People* **/** *Clermont – Wangan Jagalingou People* **/** *Collinsville – Birriah People* **/** *Dysart – Barada Barna People* **/** *Glenden – Wiri/Widi People* **/** *Mackay – Yuwi People* **/** *Middlemount – Barada Barna People* **/** *Moranbah – Barada Barna People* **/** *Proserpine – Gia People* **/** *Sarina – Yuwi People*

We also recognise Australian South Sea Islander people, their historical relationship with First Nations peoples and the contributions they have made in our community.

Quality care – Excellent, person-centred compassionate care for all.

Empowered people – A respectful, inclusive, empowering and caring place to work, learn and grow.

Healthy communities – Informed, engaged and connected communities.

Sustainable organisation – A responsible, resilient and proactive organisation.

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Message from Mackay HHS Chief Executive Sean Birgan and Mackay Hospital and Health Board Chair Monica McKendry



The newly-appointed Mackay Hospital and Health Board (HHB) and Mackay Hospital and Health Service Chief Executive Sean Birgan.

Welcome to the second edition of *The Rounds*, our new quarterly publication for Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS).

This edition reflects on the first quarter of 2026 and highlights the achievements of our clinicians and practitioners, along with patient experiences and the service improvements we continue to deliver across our region.

Over the past few months, we have maintained strong momentum and The Rounds endeavours to provide a snapshot of both our progress and the sustained improvements underway across our health service.

Helping to shape the future direction of healthcare in the Mackay region is the appointment of an eight-person board with experience in accounting, pharmacy, governance and leadership.

The newly-appointed Mackay Hospital and Health Board (HHB) is led by reappointed Chair Monica McKendry, and five new faces now complement the reappointed members and one member continuing their current term.

The Mackay HHS has joined all other Queensland HHS's in welcoming a local frontline clinician to its board.

Among the new board members is clinician Ron Nightingale, who has been a pharmacist for more than 40 years and is currently the Director of Pharmacy at Mackay Base Hospital.

We also welcome stronger representation from across our rural and regional footprint in new members Alana Moller from Clermont and Dave Nebauer (Deputy Chair) from Bowen. Other new members include Associate Professor Dr Peter Malouf, a respected leader in indigenous health and Lynn Smart who has extensive finance and directorship experience across a range of industries.

Associate Professor Dr Luke Lawton, who joined the board in 2023, has been reappointed and Andrea Ranson, appointed in 2024 is continuing her term as a board member.

Our new board complements the expertise and efforts of our HHS staff and clinical teams who remain focused on delivering high-quality, safe and equitable patient-centred care within the







region, even as we navigate increasingly complex and challenging circumstances.

The Board and Executive Leadership Team extend our genuine thanks to outgoing board members Kerry Maley, Maude Chapman and Bill Cooper for their dedication and commitment to their roles.

Their strategic vision and guidance have been instrumental in shaping our progress, strengthening our governance framework and ensuring progress on our journey to continue to provide high-quality healthcare to our community.

We are proud to see the ongoing impact of new local initiatives, many of which are detailed within these pages, which are helping enhance patient experiences, strengthen and support our workforce and progress the refurbishment of existing facilities alongside the development of vital new infrastructure.

Just as importantly, we are seeing continued growth in care initiatives and research, helping to drive innovation and extend our positive impact within the community.

This work reflects our shared commitment to continual growth, ongoing improvement and meaningful change across our regional and rural healthcare facilities. It underpins our vision to deliver healthy, empowered and connected communities.

Thank you to our 3,500-strong staff across the region for your ongoing dedication and contribution to Mackay HHS.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of *The Rounds*.

All the best, Sean and Monica



Chief Executive
Sean Birgan



Board Chair
Monica McKendry

First-year doctors a welcome boost to Mackay HHS



Twenty interns began their orientation at Mackay Base Hospital on 5 January, with another 24 interns commencing six weeks later to further support and strengthen healthcare delivery across the region.

The interns will rotate through Mackay Base Hospital as well as rural hospitals, including Proserpine and Bowen, and train under a new statewide intern training framework designed to broaden their clinical skills and build confidence early by combining hospital-based practice with general practice experience. This includes exposure to rural medicine.

Mackay HHS Chief Executive Sean Birgan said 2026 was one of the service's largest intern intakes in recent years and congratulated the new doctors on starting their journey in medicine.

"It's exciting to welcome first-year doctors to our team and support them as they begin their career with the Mackay HHS," Mr Birgan said.

"They're not only bolstering our workforce and making a real difference to our patients, but they're building the foundations of medical careers which will serve our regional and rural communities across Queensland for decades to come.

"Regardless of where their careers take them, they will develop strong foundations for the years ahead from the guidance of our experienced, dedicated and highly skilled team of Mackay HHS medical professionals."

Throughout the year, interns will gain hands-on clinical experience across key specialities including emergency, cardiology, orthopaedics, anaesthetics, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, intensive care, mental health, general medicine and general surgery.

Mackay HHS Chief Medical Officer Dr Charles Pain said the interns will benefit from Mackay HHS's friendly and welcoming atmosphere, its supportive medical culture and their broad exposure to a wide range of clinical cases.

"The interns will gain invaluable clinical experience, which will enable them to develop advanced skills as a foundation for their future medical careers," Dr Pain said.

"Their diverse placements and experience in the Mackay HHS will also help them make an informed choice when it comes to which speciality they wish to pursue in the future.

"Our hope is that by providing excellent training experiences, they will appreciate our service and value the experience they obtain and choose to build their future careers in the Mackay region."

Welcome to our 2026 interns!



Intern Kalaryn Fisher

Why medicine? I am Mackay born and bred; I was actually born in the old Base hospital. I did all of my schooling in Mackay and then went to Townsville to go to JCU.

Throughout high school, I got a bit sick and had to go in and out of the hospital. At that time, some of my family members were also in and out of the hospital, and that is when you learn what good doctors are and what bad doctors are. It sort of inspired me to want to become one of those good doctors or even be a great doctor one day.

Why Mackay? As well as it being home and my family being here, I have learnt that Mackay and all other regional rural sites don't have enough doctors and medical staff.

So coming back and hoping to be one of those doctors is a really empowering thing, and it makes me feel great coming back to be part of the community again.

Future career path? I am on the rural generalist pathway. So what that means is I do some training, I do my two-year internship, and then after that I go learn a special skill, and then I come back to a regional or rural community and apply those skills.

I am very interested in staying in the Mackay region, hopefully in Sarina, Moranbah or the Bowen area.

New generation of nurse grads begin orientation



Welcome to our newest nurse graduates!

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) has welcomed another strong intake of graduate nurses as the first orientation session commenced in February.

Executive Director Nursing and Midwifery James Williams Jenkins said 67 newly qualified nurses had been recruited to the 2026 Mackay HHS Nursing and Midwifery Graduate Program.

The two cohorts were comprised of 36 new nurses in February and 26 graduates welcomed to the Mackay HHS in March.

The Mackay HHS Nursing and Midwifery Graduate Program is 12 months in duration across Mackay Base Hospital and rural hospitals.

"We are delighted to welcome our large annual cohort of graduate nurses to the health service where they will consolidate and further develop the clinical skills they learned at university," Mr Jenkins said.

"Graduate nurses undertake placements across any of the 25 clinical areas in the Base Hospital including mental health, emergency, renal, medical, cardiac, surgical, oncology and theatres, as well as across our rural facilities," Mr Jenkins said.

Fifteen nurse graduates are undertaking rural placement across the Mackay HHS at facilities including Proserpine, Clermont, Bowen, Sarina and Dysart and there are two midwifery graduates in the program in 2026.

"They will be supported with mentoring, theoretical and clinical guidance to ensure we build safe, confident and competent nurses," Mr Jenkins said.

"Most graduates studied at CQUniversity and James Cook University and many are from the Mackay region.

"We are also pleased to welcome nursing graduates from other parts of Queensland and New South Wales as well as New Zealand."

Mackay HHS continues to support graduate registered nurses after their first year of professional practise with excellent retention rates, Mr Jenkins said.



Nurse Graduate Alex Robinson

"I am from Proserpine and really wanted a career that could help my community and I feel that nursing puts you in a great position to do this.

"Nurses are always going to be needed and they can really help everyone right through from preventative health to aged care. Every community needs nurses.

"We've had two weeks of orientation in Mackay and because I'm going to do rural nursing, I've been focused on advanced life support and trauma response. Rural facilities often lack these specialists, so nurses must be able to cover all these areas as well.

"Going to Proserpine, we only have a small operating theatre which operates Monday to Friday for smaller procedures and then there's an ED and a general ward. As a post-graduate, I'll start in the general ward and the goal is to gain confidence and feel much more capable in the nursing role before I start rotating.

"So it's been great to get back into the clinical setting and be actively using that clinical terminology again. It's also nice to know that other nurse grads are feeling the same. We're nervous but excited, so that's very reassuring.

"A lot of nurses choose to go into a speciality, but I'm really focused on rural nursing. I think it's fundamental you become a good nurse first because in rural facilities, you really have to combine the specialities.

"So my future goal is to become a great nurse and then maybe do some remote nursing or work in the Aboriginal health sector. But I'm very keen to stay in Proserpine and contribute back to my community, that's the goal for now."



New chief executive appointed

Mr Sean Birgan took up the position of Chief Executive at Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) following a four-month secondment to the role.

Mackay Hospital and Health Board (HHB) Chair Monica McKendry made the announcement in February, welcoming Mr Birgan for a five-year appointment.

"Mackay HHS has benefitted greatly from Sean's extensive leadership experience since he joined us as Chief Executive in an interim capacity in October," Ms McKendry said.

"I am very pleased to announce that, following an extensive recruitment process, Sean was selected to lead our health service.

"Sean has a proven record of leading health services through periods of change and strengthening both governance and service delivery.

"His experience, commitment to patient-centred care, and collaborative leadership style will be a great asset to Mackay HHS and the communities we serve."

Mr Birgan said he was honoured to take on the permanent role.

"I am delighted to join Mackay HHS and to continue working alongside the dedicated clinicians and staff who deliver outstanding care across this region," Mr Birgan said.

"Since stepping into the role, I have seen our teams implement practical initiatives that increased services, streamlined patient flow and strengthened capacity across our hospitals and community services.

"I look forward to building on this to ensure we continue delivering safe, high-quality healthcare for our communities."

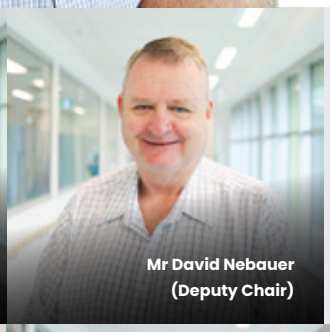
Mr Birgan was previously Chief Executive of North West Hospital and Health Service, based in Mt Isa.

He has more than 40 years of nursing experience, including 20 years in senior leadership and management roles.

Sean was Queensland Health's COVID-19 System Response Lead, coordinating the state's COVID-19 operational response.

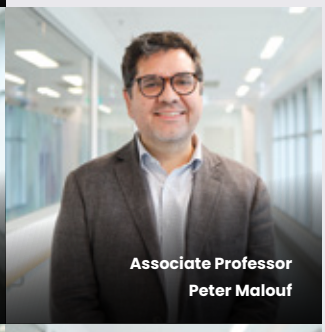
He also has a keen interest in disaster management and preparedness and provides ongoing support to Indonesian nurses and health executives in Bali as part of the Bali Memorial Package.


Ms Monica McKendry (Chair)


Mr David Nebauer (Deputy Chair)

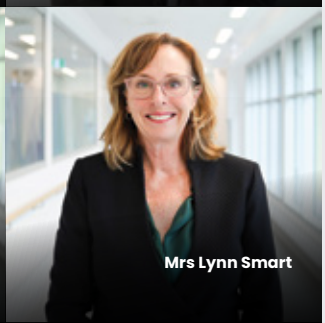

Associate Professor Luke Lawton


Mr Ron Nightingale


Associate Professor Peter Malouf


Ms Andrea Ranson


Mrs Alana Moller


Mrs Lynn Smart

Ceremonial event welcomes new Board

Helping to shape the future direction of healthcare in the Mackay region is an eight-person board with experience in accounting, pharmacy, governance and leadership.

The newly-appointed Mackay Hospital and Health Board (HHB) is led by reappointed Chair Monica McKendry, and five new faces now complement the reappointed members and one member continuing their current term.

The Board was officially welcomed to their roles and first meeting on Thursday 23 April 2026 with a Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony by Yuwi elder Philip Kemp and a Torres Strait Islander prayer by Seba Kaigey.

The events at the Mackay Base Hospital marked a new beginning and the milestone of the first meeting of the new eight-person Board who oversee strategy, governance and performance of the region's health service.

Local couple welcomes second son amid New Year celebrations



Slade Point toddler Aiden Lea went to bed as usual one night and woke up the next year as a big brother.

His little brother Keegan George was born in a hurry at 2am on January 1, just 11 minutes after his mum arrived at the Mackay Birth Centre.

Parents Peter and Corrina Lea welcomed their second son four days early on New Year's Day, making him the first baby of 2026 in the Mackay region.

Corrina's waters broke about 9:30pm on December 31, and her contractions started at 10pm.

"I had spent the entire Christmas holidays redecorating Aiden's new bedroom," she said.

"Pete kept joking that the minute I finished, the baby would arrive. I spent New Year's Eve finalising a dinosaur mural and installing the skirting and generally finishing it off.

"I sat down at about 9:15pm and announced to Peter that I am actually fully finished, and he mentioned we just had to adjust the door handle.

"So we jumped up, and as we were doing that, my waters broke."

Corrina's parents were celebrating the New Year at home at Cape Hillsborough when they got a call just before midnight to come and look after their grandson.

"I was trying to pack up my tools during labour, but I insisted Pete finish the door handle whilst I was in the bath."

The couple arrived at the Mackay Birth Centre at Mackay Base Hospital at 1.52am, and Keegan was born just 11 minutes later at 2.03am, weighing 3.91kg and measuring 54cm long.

Despite his very quick arrival, Corrina said it was a very normal pregnancy with no complications.

"This was my second pregnancy through the Mackay Birth Centre. I definitely miss the old building, but the midwives were fantastic." Corrina said.

"Massive thank you to Katie, my assigned midwife, and Marion, my delivery midwife. Both of them were wonderful.

"Katie has been fantastic through the pregnancy and the post-natal care, and Marion was amazing on the night of Keegan's delivery; she made it feel like we'd known each other the whole time, and I felt very cared for."

Keegan was given the middle name George in honour of Corrina's great uncle, who turned 100 on 8 January. Unfortunately, the family missed his birthday party, but they had a good excuse.

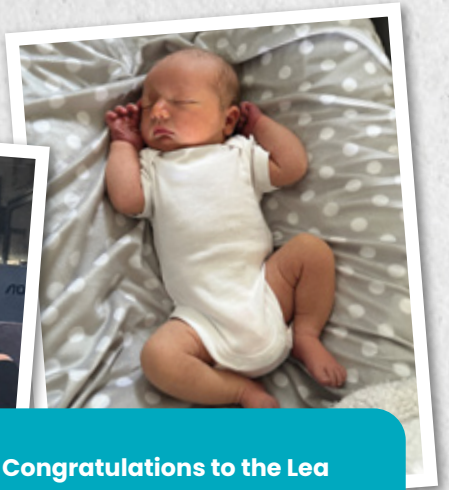
Corrina was discharged from the Mackay Birth Centre about four hours after Keegan's birth and was back home before Aiden woke up on New Year's Day.

"We don't usually do a whole lot on New Year's, so it was definitely eventful for us," she said.

"Keegan has settled in really well. Aiden went to bed on New Year's Eve as usual and woke up, and we were back home already with his baby brother. He was quite surprised when he woke up."







Congratulations to the Lea family on their beautiful New Year's arrival. 💙💙

Bell-ringing celebration signals Lijah's recovery from rare childhood cancer

Some victories are louder than applause. When one-year-old Lijah Tomkinson rang the bell at Mackay Base Hospital, it marked the end of cancer treatment, the beginning of a new chapter and a hard-won victory for his family.







The joyful moment celebrated an extraordinary 12-month journey for the toddler and his parents, Jay and Annie Tomkinson, after Lijah overcame a rare form of cancer.

A quick photograph in November 2024 was all it took for the Mackay mum to confirm that a golden reflection in her newborn's eye would ultimately change her son's life.

At just six weeks old, Lijah was diagnosed with Retinoblastoma, a rare childhood cancer that affects the eye, and he was urgently referred to the Queensland Children's Hospital for treatment.

His family and friends, alongside paediatric nursing teams, gathered in the courtyard at Mackay Base Hospital to ring the bell and see the tot cut a Bluey and Bingo cake to celebrate his remarkable recovery and signify the completion of his cancer treatment.

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) Paediatric Oncology and Haematology clinical nurse consultant Trista Simpson supported Lijah and his family throughout his year-long journey.

"I've been in awe of Annie and Jay's strength and resilience for a long time, and Lijah is just such a happy baby," Trista said.

"He's endured countless surgeries, procedures, blood tests and chemotherapy; it's been a long ordeal, so we are thrilled to be here today to celebrate the end of his treatment."

Lijah's story touched hearts across the community after a GoFundMe page was set up and raised $32,000 to help with travel expenses, medical costs and lost income.

The Tomkinson family said they were overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and support they received during what was an unimaginably difficult time.

"We are so privileged to have such a caring health team take such good care of Lijah and us," Annie said.

"As a parent, you never think you'd have to face this, but having Trista and team has made the world of difference to our whole experience. Everyone who walked alongside us has got us to this point.

"We are privileged and grateful to be here today. Lijah is thriving and very active, and that is all the blessings we will continue to count."

Dad Jay said it had been a difficult 12 months after finding out on a Friday, having Lijah's diagnosis confirmed on a Monday and then to be aboard a plane on their way to Brisbane to begin treatment on Wednesday.

> **"Today is somewhat bittersweet as Lijah did lose an eye, but he is healthy and thriving and he will have an awesome life .... and hopefully be a front rower for the Cowboys," he said.**

"But he is such a happy baby and we couldn't have done it without the support of the medical teams here in Mackay and in Brisbane."

Huge congratulations to gorgeous Lijah and the Tomkinson family! 🔔💙

Tiny turtles integrate culture and resilience into hospital care



Mackay HHS Executive Director Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Kerry Maley, Mackay HHS Chief Executive Sean Birgan, Baeden Choppy, Mackay HHS cultural practice co-ordinator Phil Kemp, Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) chief superintendent James Cunington, and front, Mackay Base Hospital patient Lola Choppy with QAS paramedic Matt Maley.

Tiny crochet turtles are making a big difference for patients at Mackay Base Hospital, offering comfort, connection and a reminder of quiet strength during challenging moments.

Carefully crafted by a local artist, the turtles are being gifted to patients by paramedics and staff at the hospital as a symbol of connection to land, water and community.

While small in size, the meaning runs deep. The turtle represents resilience and endurance; carrying its home on its back as a metaphor for self-reliance and the ability to find peace within, regardless of external circumstances.

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) Executive Director Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Kerry Maley said the initiative was born from a vision to meaningfully integrate culture into regional healthcare.

The crochet turtles provided emotional support, enhanced patient comfort and helped build rapport between patients and healthcare teams, she said.

"This is a way to integrate cultural elements to help enhance patient care and support the wellbeing of patients in the Mackay community," Mrs Maley said.

"The turtle is a powerful message and reminder about patience, resilience and persistence over time."

Often associated with longevity and endurance due to their long lifespans and slow, steady movements, turtles also served as a reminder that progress doesn't have to be rushed.

"As the saying goes, a turtle only makes progress when it sticks its neck out, so it also provides gentle encouragement for patients facing uncertainty or recovery," Mrs Maley said.

Gifting the crochet turtles to patients coming to the hospital also helped strengthen relationships between Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS), Mackay Hospital and Health Service (Mackay HHS) clinicians and the community, fostering trust and engagement with local health services.

By addressing emotional and spiritual needs alongside physical care, the crochet turtle initiative reflected a holistic approach to healthcare, Mrs Maley said.

"The turtles are a small gesture grounded in culture and care, which can have a lasting impact on the patient journey."

Helipad and fleet car park upgrades commence



Vassallo Constructions' Vic Vassallo, Mackay Hospital and Health Board Chair Monica McKendry, Mackay Hospital and Health Service Chief Executive Sean Birgan, Vassallo Constructions' Damian Vassallo and Minister for Health and Ambulance Services Tim Nicholls.

Minister for Health and Ambulance Services Tim Nicholls visited Mackay Base Hospital on 30 April to formally announce the successful tenderer and commencement of works, which will see the return of aeromedical transfers and provide additional fleet car parking.

Local civil contractor Vassallo Constructions have been appointed to refurbish the onsite helipad and construct a temporary car park which will facilitate approximately 80 Queensland Health fleet spaces on the cleared expansion site.

The project is expected to be completed by mid-year and be operational later this year.

These works represent an important step toward addressing two of our key priorities in enhancing the hospital's infrastructure and how we serve the community.

The helipad refurbishment will be carried out to ensure that it complies with the current Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) guidelines and we will continue to work with CQ Rescue and other key stakeholders as this work progresses.

Aeromedical transfers were temporarily moved to the Mackay Airport in 2024 as part of expansion early works.

The new temporary car park will provide approximately 80 car spaces, specifically for Queensland Health fleet vehicles.

This will free up space for more public and staff parking in other areas on the hospital campus, providing some relief to current car parking challenges.

Master planning continues for the Mackay Base Hospital which will identify a staged approach to growing the hospital campus. The master plan is expected to be completed mid-year.

The riverside service road will be open to essential vehicles only. For staff and contractor safety, there is strictly no private vehicle or pedestrian access permitted on this road.

We will keep you updated as the helipad and fleet car park project progresses and look forward to the benefits it will bring to our staff, patients and community.







1. Sean Birgan speaks at the announcement press conference.
2. Tim Nicholls and Sean Birgan tour the Transit Care Hub with Director of Nursing and Operations Emma Hess and Transit Care Hub nurse unit manager Garth Brewster-Webb.
3. The hospital's helipad is currently being refurbished to ensure it is fit for purpose to receive and transfer patients via helicopter.
4. Works are underway on a new temporary fleet car park at Mackay Base Hospital.
5. Fleet car park emergency exit path.







Director of Rural Medical Services Dr Hannah Trimble

Workforce the greatest reward and challenge facing rural healthcare

From cyclones and multi-trauma emergencies to maternity care and end-of-life medicine, rural healthcare demands doctors who are ready for anything.

Few understand that reality better than Dr Hannah Trimble, whose career across Far North and regional Queensland has shaped both her clinical expertise and her commitment to rural communities.

A highly experienced rural generalist, Dr Trimble now steps into a new and challenging leadership role as Director of Rural Medical Services at Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS).

Her career journey through various rural hospitals has given her a deep appreciation of the complexity, responsibility and resilience required of a medical workforce.

"To be a rural generalist you have to be practical, adaptable, decisive and be comfortable with uncertainty," Dr Trimble said.

"We are very experienced and passionate consultants who are not anonymous to our patients – outcomes and experiences matter in any facility but I think that runs really deep in smaller communities where we are known much more intimately," she said.

Dr Trimble has been the Acting Director of Medical Services at Proserpine Hospital since October 2022 before taking on her latest role this month while still maintaining a clinical role there as a rural generalist obstetrician.

"Proserpine Hospital is one of the busiest rural hospitals in the state with a large medical team; I am very proud to be part of that and to have had that experience in leadership," she said.

"It has helped me prepare for this role and given me a large network of colleagues and other leaders to draw on."

After her rural GP training with ACRRM (Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine), she joined the Proserpine Hospital team in 2009 as a senior medical officer and later completed Obstetrics and Gynaecology as an advanced skill at Mackay Base Hospital.

"Although I thought of other specialities early in my career, I have the best of everything as a rural generalist, you can literally be anything and everything," she said.

"In one day I can be treating a broken limb and then deal with a multi-trauma in ED and then go to theatre for a caesarean section.

"As well as this I am offering care right from the very start of life in antenatal clinics to end-of-life care for palliative patients on the ward.

"There is not a more rewarding or challenging job and I am very lucky to be doing it here in the Whitsundays."

Dr Trimble's extensive rural experience and scope of practice ensures she understands and is well-equipped to face the demands and challenges as Director of Rural Medical Services.

> **"Workforce is our biggest challenge and there is unfortunately, no quick fix for this, so developing sustainable models that attract and retain staff as well as addressing a huge supply shortage with our own pipeline and training are important," Dr Trimble said.**

"We have excellent rural generalist training and progression opportunities here that we can build on.

"Strong foundations build strong buildings; and this is the same with our workforce in our healthcare facilities and across the Mackay HHS," she said.

Credentials boost confidence in cardiac care



Senior cardiac physiologist Annie Luke and clinical director of cardiology Dr Michael Zhang.

Mackay Base Hospital has a strong reputation for excellence in cardiac care, with two staff members possessing one of the most respected international certifications in heart rhythm management.

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) clinical director of cardiology Dr Michael Zhang and senior cardiac physiologist Annie Luke are both credentialed by the International Board of Heart Rhythm Examiners (IBHRE), the global gold standard in heart rhythm management certification.

On 9 February we honoured their work on International Board of Heart Rhythm Examiners (IBHRE) Day, a time to celebrate these cardiac specialists, their achievements and their impact on the field of heart rhythm management.

Patients requiring complex heart rhythm care in Mackay are benefiting from their expertise and enhanced specialist cardiac care which reinforces the hospital's reputation for delivering world-class healthcare close to home.

"These credentials give our regional patients confidence that cardiac care here in Mackay is gold standard and that our level of skill and knowledge is globally recognised," Dr Zhang said.

"For a regional hospital to have this level of expertise is a real strength and demonstrates to our patients, colleagues and to our peers, both our skills and commitment to excellent care."

Annie, who has worked in the Clinical Measurements Unit at Mackay Base Hospital for five years, said the certification had strengthened both her professional practice and patient outcomes.

"This certification validates our specialised knowledge in pacing and cardiac device therapy, which is essential for safely caring for regional patients with complex rhythm disorders," she said.

These achievements place Mackay Base Hospital among a select number of services worldwide with multiple IBHRE-certified practitioners, as they are among just 381 certified specialists across Australia and New Zealand.

Dr Zhang holds the Certified Cardiac Device Specialist (CCDS) physician credential, while Ms Luke has earned the CCDS Allied Health Professional qualification. Both completed rigorous, self-funded examinations, with Dr Zhang sitting the physician exam in Sydney and Ms Luke completing the allied health exam in Brisbane.

The examinations are widely regarded as demanding, with pass rates reflecting the depth of expertise required. Only around 66 per cent of physician candidates (20 out of 30) passed worldwide in 2024, while in the allied health stream 108 of 257 candidates failed in the same year.

IBHRE certification is an American qualification that is compulsory for practitioners caring for pacing patients in many settings worldwide. Since 1985, IBHRE has certified more than 17,000 heart rhythm practitioners across 70 countries, with more than 10,000 actively practising today.

Mackay Base Hospital proudly acknowledges Dr Zhang and Ms Luke for their commitment to continuous learning and clinical excellence.

Congratulations on attaining your globally recognised credentials which are also enhancing specialist cardiac care for patients in the Mackay region.



Specialist melanoma clinical nurse consultant Bini Varghese

Bini bridges care for skin cancer treatment journey

Bini Varghese describes her new role as being a bridge between doctors and patients navigating the "rollercoaster journey" of melanoma treatment.

As the first specialist melanoma clinical nurse consultant for Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS), Bini works within a multi-disciplinary team to provide care and support for patients undergoing treatment for one of the deadliest forms of skin cancer.

The Mackay region has one of the highest rates of melanoma in Queensland with about 170 new cases diagnosed each year. This represents a 41 per cent increase in cases locally in the last six years, Bini said.

Embedded within the melanoma multi-disciplinary service, Bini will act as a central point of contact for those who are on active treatment. Her new role is temporary until June and is funded by the Melanoma Institute of Australia.

"I will be providing support, education and advanced specialist nursing care, working closely with general surgery and medical oncology to support patients throughout their treatment journey," she said.

Bini brings extensive clinical experience to the role, having previously worked at Sarina and Mackay Base hospitals in the general surgery unit, as well as trauma and orthopaedics in Brisbane. The opportunity to provide specialist, ongoing support to patients was a major drawcard of the role.

"This is a different kind of trauma," she said.

"Every patient's diagnosis, treatment and experience is unique."

A melanoma diagnosis could be overwhelming for patients and their loved ones, impacting every aspect of life.

"Diagnosis is life-changing. It becomes an emotional, financial and personal rollercoaster," Bini said.

"This role is about personalising the cancer care journey, helping to minimise the impact of disease and treatment complications, and optimising patient outcomes.

"It's also vital as a point of call for patients who experience side effects or complications, helping them get the right advice early and potentially avoid presentations to the emergency department during or after treatment."

After breast and prostate cancer, melanoma is the most common cancer for Australians aged 20 to 39. One Australian dies from melanoma every six hours.

"It can be aggressive and fast-progressing, but if detected and treated early, there is around a 90 per cent recovery rate," Bini said.

"Treatment times can range from 12 months to years depending on the stage of melanoma, a patient's age and their overall health."

Bini emigrated to Queensland from southern India in 2000 and moved to Mackay in 2011.

She said sun safety in the region could not be overstated.

"Early detection of melanoma is key. Regular skin checks and investigating any changes to moles as soon as possible can save lives," she said.

"People need to look after their skin the same way they look after the rest of their health. There are lots of resources available, and now there's more local support too."

Bini is looking forward to working closely with general surgery, day infusion, medical oncology teams and local GPs, while also connecting with other specialist melanoma clinical nurse consultants in Townsville, Bundaberg and Hervey Bay at a conference in June.

> **"This will be a challenge and a learning curve, but this is a role that is very much needed in the Mackay region," she said.**

"I'm really looking forward to being that supportive bridge between doctors and patients as they undergo treatment."

Bini sees patients in Specialist Outpatients (SOPD) from Monday to Wednesday, 7am to 3pm.



MELANOMA FAST FACTS

- 1300 people die from melanoma each year.
- One Australian is diagnosed with melanoma every 30 minutes.
- Melanoma is the most common cancer affecting Australians aged 20 to 39.
- 90 per cent of melanomas can be cured by surgery if caught early.
- Overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) light causes 95% of melanoma, so the best way to prevent it is to protect your skin from the sun.

Forum connects leaders to help reflect voices



Mackay HHS Chief Executive Sean Birgan, Acting Chief First Nations Health Officer Jessica Oostenbroek, Mackay Hospital and Health Board (HHB) Chair Monica McKendry and Executive Director Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Community Engagement Kerry Maley.

Improving health access and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples was the focus of conversation at the First Nations Leads Forum held in Mackay in March.

The Mackay Base Hospital hosted leaders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health units from health services across the state who came together to discuss key issues, identify common challenges and drive local improvements in healthcare delivery. This included executive directors from Brisbane to Mount Isa and up to Torres Strait and Cape.

It's only the second time the meeting has occurred away from south-east Queensland and attendees were able to get a greater appreciation for the challenges of health services and workers in regional and rural settings.

As well as members of the First Nations Health team from Brisbane, Acting Chief First Nations Health Officer Jessica Oostenbroek joined the forum to connect with health leaders to ensure their First Nation perspectives are central to decision-making and to help create a health system that is genuinely led by First Nations' voices.

Also attending the forum were representatives from the office of the Chief Midwife Officer, office of the Chief Nurse Officer, office of the Chief Allied Health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy and Partnerships and HSCE Forum office.

Virtual attendees included representatives from the Office of Workforce Relations and Policy, Office of Chief Health Officer, Office of Chief Dental and the Chief Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Officer.

The forum is part of a broader commitment by Queensland Health to improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia's Russell Briggs and prostate cancer specialist nurse Louise Jackson.

Prostate cancer specialist nurse marks major step for men and health service

A new support service for men diagnosed with prostate cancer is now available at Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS), thanks to a funding partnership with the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia.

Mackay HHS Executive Director Operations Mackay Jenny Farley said the appointment of prostate cancer specialist nurse Louise Jackson is a first for the health service.

"Prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia and Mackay has higher-than-average rates of diagnosis," Ms Farley said.

"Having a dedicated specialist nurse to guide patients and families through such a stressful time can make a real difference. We are thrilled to introduce this service."

Louise Jackson will support anyone with a prostate cancer diagnosis, regardless of whether they are public or private patients.

"I am based at Mackay Base Hospital and will visit the Icon Cancer Centre regularly," she said.

"Anyone can self-refer simply by giving me a call."

Ms Jackson said her role is to help patients navigate the health system, understand their treatment options and support the management of side effects.

"I'm here to answer their questions—what treatment involves, where to get tests done—and to help ease the fears that come with a cancer diagnosis," she said.

"Having someone on the ground to provide that support is incredibly important for patients and their families.

"In its early stages, prostate cancer often has no symptoms," Ms Jackson said.

"If you have a family history of the disease please talk to your doctor as your risk may be higher."

Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia (PCFA) encourages men over 40 to speak with their doctor about having a simple PSA blood test for early detection.

PCFA CEO Anne Savage said the introduction of a dedicated prostate cancer specialist nurse in Mackay marks a major step forward for local men and their families.

"We are incredibly proud to partner with Mackay HHS to fund this position and ensure men in the region have access to the specialised care they deserve," Ms Savage said.

"Mackay has among the highest incidence and mortality rates in Australia, with high numbers of men and families in need of specialist support.

"Having a specialist nurse on the ground means men will have someone in their corner throughout survivorship, helping them understand treatment, navigate the system, and feel supported every step of the way."

Ms Savage said the new role will help reduce distress, improve treatment outcomes, and ensure families in Mackay are not alone.

"This service will make a meaningful difference for local men — and we are honoured to help make it possible," she said.

Anyone with a confirmed prostate cancer diagnosis can contact Louise Jackson on 0498 569 868 or email MKY-Prostate-Cancer-Specialist-Nurse@health.qld.gov.au

For more information about prostate cancer, visit www.prostate.org.au or phone 1800 22 00 99.

MACKAY FAST FACTS
(Cancer Council Queensland data)

- **Prostate cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in the Mackay region**
- **There are 140 cases diagnosed locally per year**
- **The second most common diagnosis is breast cancer (99 cases)**
- **There are 14 deaths per year locally**

Nurse-led care team celebrate service milestone



PODSS clinical nurse consultants Erin Sherry and Chelsea Presley are the first point of care for patients post surgery and up to 30 days post discharge.

The Post Operative Discharge Support Service (PODSS) team are celebrating the milestone of 5,000 consultations.

The milestone on Tuesday 24 February came just under two years since the service was launched, with Mackay Base Hospital the second to commence the service in Queensland in March 2024.

The nurse-led, rapid access service is the first point of care for patients with complications, concerns or questions post surgery and up to 30 days post hospital discharge. It was developed to streamline patient care, reduce emergency department visits and support the recovery of surgical patients in the region.

Since it commenced, the service has managed issues including wound care, pain management, swelling, minor bleeding, scheduling follow-ups and obtaining medical documents.

Mackay PODSS clinical nurse consultant Chelsea Presley said 60 per cent of PODSS cases were managed by nurses over the phone with 25 per cent seen in the PODSS Rapid Access Clinic (RAC).

This was helping keep patients out of the ED and ensured they had shorter wait times for post-operative care.

"It's streamlining their care beyond discharge and supporting their recovery. We provide information and reassurance in regard to pain, dressings and wound care, as well as follow-up appointments and general advice," Chelsea said.

"We are primarily a phone-based Rapid Access Service (RAS) supported by a clinic that is available daily for urgent patient assessment and management."

Since PODSS was implemented, the percentage of clinically avoidable ED presentations for post-operative patients who were within 30 days of surgery had more than halved, Chelsea said.

"We've had some wonderful feedback also including that 98 per cent of patients using PODSS reported that their concerns were addressed in a timely manner and 97 per cent reported that it had actually improved their patient experience," she said.

"Some of the other comments from patients include that they felt reassured knowing they had a direct line to assistance when needed and that they found the service excellent, fast and responsive.

"This service is also very useful for patients who live out of town and need advice when they get home from hospital.

"It's a great way to provide support to our patients and relieve pressure in the ED," she said.

Congratulations to the Mackay PODSS team for their valued contribution to better patient care and a more efficient healthcare system.

Service enhances care of frail, elderly patients

Bowen Hospital's Frail Aged Nurse Practitioner Service is delivering essential outreach care to help the community's most vulnerable residents stay healthy and independent for longer.

Designed for people aged 65 and older, and First Nations people aged 50 and over, the Frail Aged Nurse Practitioner Service (FANPS) provides clinical assessments, support pathways and care in a variety of community settings.

Service lead and nurse practitioner Alicia Gubb describes FANPS as a crucial link for residents to access early intervention and ongoing support.

"With Bowen's ageing population, there is a need for nursing and support services here. We are a multidisciplinary team of four, including a clinical nurse consultant, social worker and First Nations liaison officer, supporting older people who might otherwise delay seeking care or face the stress of a hospital visit," she said.

"The service provides comprehensive care in the community by managing a range of common conditions in older people, including infections, acute delirium, minor injuries and changes in chronic diseases.

"Since commencing in October 2024, we've seen the service grow to meet a real need in our community. During our first month of operation, we conducted 70 appointments; that number has more than doubled to reach 192 appointments in January this year."

Alicia said FANPS aims to improve access to care and help reduce emergency department presentations by providing acute primary care in the Bowen community.

"Timely management of health conditions is particularly important in rural areas with limited urgent care access. As a nurse practitioner, I have advanced scope of practice which means I am able to treat people, such as nursing home residents experiencing infections and condition flare-ups.

"We're already seeing the impact early intervention is having on emergency department presentations, with a 25 per cent reduction in less urgent (triage 4 and 5) cases in December 2025 for patients aged over 75, compared to the same period in 2024."



Bowen's Frail Aged Nurse Practitioner Service includes clinical nurse consultant Melanie Mitchell, social worker Michelle Bates, nurse practitioner Alica Gubb, Virtual Health support officer and First Nations liaison officer Cherie Ives

Referrals to the service come from a range of sources, including the emergency department, GPs, aged care providers, care workers and community service organisations.

"On average, the service receives 10 referrals a week. We see hospital inpatients ready for discharge, as well as people receiving in-home care who need additional support," Alicia said.

"We also visit local nursing homes to identify anyone with emerging health issues between GP visits.

"I see 18 residents each week at our two nursing homes in Bowen, for issues ranging from infections and mood disorders to palliative care and advanced care planning."

The team recently launched a new Frailty Rapid Access Clinic with telehealth geriatricians – specialist doctors who care for older people.

"FANPS works directly with the telehealth geriatrician service Geriatric Care Australia which provides specialist input into managing complex geriatric conditions, such as delirium, young-onset Alzheimer's dementia and capacity concerns," Alicia said.

"The clinic reviews community patients with urgent concerns and at risk of hospital presentation where the geriatrician provides support and guidance to the nurse practitioner in complex cases, such as advice for prescribing and management of geriatric conditions."

Alicia said the team's proactive approach provides early intervention to help people remain in the familiar surroundings of their homes and avoid a decline in health.

"Sometimes older people who live alone don't always have someone to notice health changes. They can be quite stoic and may not seek care until it's too late," she said.

"Our social worker helps families navigate services and reduces stress for patients by connecting them to supports, advocating for patients to commence or increase My Aged Care services, concerns for elder abuse, supporting financial hardship and housing crisis and emotional and grief support.

"Given older adults are a vulnerable population, our social worker is vital in avoiding crisis situations that can often result in lengthy inpatient admissions.

> **"We want to enable our older patients to spend as little time in hospital as possible, prevent deterioration in frailty and improve their quality of life."**

New era of healthcare in Moranbah celebrated

Completion of the Moranbah Hospital Redevelopment was marked at a recent celebration event.

Staff and community partners gathered at the hospital to acknowledge the redevelopment and its significant boost to healthcare infrastructure in Moranbah.

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) Chief Executive Sean Birgan said the Moranbah Hospital Redevelopment would positively impact the health and wellbeing of people in Moranbah for years to come.

"From the integration of hospital and community health services to an expanded emergency department to the addition of a new onsite helipad; the project was always about enhancing health care and bringing services closer to home," he said.

"This is an important infrastructure project for the Isaac region and more importantly, it is a transformational project for the people of the Moranbah community.

"Thank you to the dedicated Moranbah Hospital staff, Mackay HHS Capital Projects, Health Infrastructure Queensland and community who worked to plan, design and produce the project, ensuring it serves the region now and into the future."

The Moranbah Hospital Redevelopment was carried out in two stages with the new, state-of-the-art hospital opening for care in November 2024, followed by the construction of the onsite helipad which became operational a year later in November 2025.









1. Registered nurse Bronwyn Dagen, Executive Director Nursing and Midwifery Services James William Jenkins and Moranbah Hospital operational officer Win Kent. 2. Isaac Regional Council chief executive officer Cale Dendle and Mackay HHS Chief Executive Sean Birgan. 3. Moranbah Hospital business manager Debra Rutland, Moranbah Hospital's Simone Hare, Executive Director Rural and Public Health Julie Minogue, Sean Birgan, Monica McKendry, Moranbah Hospital Director of Nursing and facility manager Melanie Hornery and Director of Rural Medical Services Dr Hannah Trimble. 4. Dr Hannah Trimble, fifth-year JCU medical student Ryan Luck and fourth-year JCU medical student Samson McBride.



Husband's 20-year journey the inspiration for renal career

For Katrina Linthwaite, kidney disease has shaped much of her adult life.

Now a renal nurse at Mackay Base Hospital, Katrina once stood on the other side of the hospital bed, supporting her husband Gavin through kidney failure, dialysis and two life-saving transplants over more than two decades.

On World Kidney Day (Thursday 12 March), Katrina reflected on a journey that has taken her from cane farmer's wife and carer to qualified nurse helping others facing the same diagnosis.

Life for the Koumala couple changed dramatically in 2000 when Gavin, then 28, was kicked in the back by a cow while working on the farm. The injury led doctors to discover something far more serious, an autoimmune disease called IgA nephropathy that had already reduced his kidney function to about 20 per cent.

The couple had just welcomed their first child when the diagnosis came.

"It was a real struggle for him," Katrina said. "He didn't take the diagnosis well at all. He became quite depressed.

"Doctors told him his kidneys were failing and dialysis would soon be necessary. Just six months later he began haemodialysis at Mackay Base Hospital twice a week, travelling 45 minutes each way from the farm for five-hour treatments."

With a young family and a busy farm to manage, the routine was exhausting. Katrina, who was 22 and a new mum, remembers those early years as overwhelming.

"It was really hard because he was so unwell afterwards," she said. "For a farmer to travel that far and then be wiped out for the rest of the day was tough."

Determined to improve their quality of life, Katrina pushed for home dialysis. The couple undertook training in Townsville and installed an ultra-water filtration system to manage the property's hard water before set up of the dialysis machine in their home.

For Gavin, who had a severe needle phobia, learning to cannulate himself was daunting. But the flexibility of dialysing at home allowed him to keep working on the farm before dialysing in the afternoon.

After two years of home dialysis, they finally received the call they had been hoping for; a kidney transplant was available. It was the third call they had received. Twice before, illness meant Gavin could not go ahead with surgery.

In November 2003, at the age of 30, he underwent a kidney transplant at Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital. By then the couple had two young children, including a six-month-old daughter. Katrina spent eight weeks in Brisbane supporting him through the operation and recovery while family cared for their son back home.

Kidney transplants are not cures, Katrina said. Donated kidneys generally last around 15 years and recipients must take anti-rejection medication for life.

For Gavin, that prediction proved accurate. Fifteen years after the transplant he began to feel the familiar signs of kidney failure again – extreme fatigue, poor appetite and declining health.

By 2018 he was critically ill and flown to Brisbane where doctors inserted a permacath into his chest and their pre-transplant routine returned, travelling from Koumala to Mackay three times a week for dialysis.

In August 2019 the phone rang just after midnight while Katrina and her daughters were attending a campdraft at Blue Mountain. Another kidney had become available.

"I had to get home, organise everything on the farm and we were on a flight at 6am," she said.

Gavin received his second transplant that evening during a six-hour operation in Brisbane.

Seven years on, Gavin is doing well. Their long journey with kidney disease also inspired Katrina to pursue a new career.

She enrolled in nursing at CQUniversity and graduated in 2022, the same year her youngest child finished Year 12. In 2023 she secured a postgraduate position in the renal unit at Mackay Base Hospital, although her husband initially questioned the choice. "He said, 'Do you really want to work in renal after everything we've been through?'" Katrina said.

"But I wanted to give people hope and let them know someone understands what they're going through," she said.

Katrina believes her personal experience gives her a deeper connection with patients and families.

"I've been on the patient journey with Gavin and now I'm on the other side of it," she said. "It makes me more empathetic and understanding."

Renal disease can take a heavy emotional toll on patients and their partners, she said, with depression common among people facing organ failure and the lifestyle restrictions dialysis brings.

But Katrina also reminds patients that every journey is different.

"We're actually the lucky ones," she said. "Gavin's had two transplants, he's seen our kids grow up and he's now got grandkids.

"I was a cane farmer's wife who learnt a lot through our own journey," she said. "Now I'm here working, helping other people through theirs."

Locals join global trial to test new drug for rare lung disease



Respiratory physicians Dr Yi Tat Lo and Dr Muhammad Nazmi.

Three Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) patients are part of a worldwide clinical trial to test a new drug for a rare and often fatal lung disease.

A total of 165 patients from 85 trial sites across the globe, including eight in Australia, are participating in the clinical trial testing a potential new drug treatment for Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF), a serious respiratory disease characterised by stiffening of the lung tissue due to progressive scarring.

The Mackay Institute of Research and Innovation (MIRI), the research arm of the Mackay HHS, was a key contributor to the study and was the second-highest recruiting site in Australia, according to Dr Pieter Nel, Director of Medical Services Research and Innovation.

"This is a significant achievement and an opportunity to trial new treatments that would otherwise only be available to sufferers in metropolitan centres," he said.

"It also highlights the growing capacity and capability of our Mackay clinical trials unit, providing greater local access for patients to these types of treatments, which is a key focus area for the health service."

Those overseeing work on the trial include respiratory physicians Dr Yi Tat Lo and Dr Muhammad Nazmi.

"The aim of the trial is to see whether a new drug treatment will be helpful to reduce the scarring in the lungs or slow it down," Dr Lo said.

"To date there are only two drugs approved in Australia for IPF to slow the progression of the disease.

"While some patients may be eligible for lung transplants, older patients may not.

"The available drugs have side effects, including bowel symptoms and liver function decline and eventually aren't able to be tolerated. Some patients even stop treatment because of these side effects."

Without treatment, the prognosis for patients is poor according to Dr Nazmi.

"When the diagnosis comes after the age of 60, it can progress rapidly. Without treatment, the average life expectancy is about 3 to 5 years." Dr Nazmi said.

The 26-week study is a randomised placebo-controlled trial with the three local participants receiving either the investigational drug or a placebo alongside standard care.

About clinical trials

- Given the investigational nature of clinical trials, there is no guarantee of benefit to the patient.
- Participation in clinical trials is voluntary – all participants continue to receive standard medical care, and eligibility is assessed by the clinical trial team according to strict ethical and safety requirements.
- Though this trial is now closed to patient recruitment, MIRI has other active trials in the areas of mental health, oncology, anaesthetics, renal, respiratory and obstetrics and gynaecology.
- To find out more, contact MIRI on 4885 6788 or mackay-clinical-trials@health.qld.gov.au

Clinical trial patient John enrolled in the trial six months ago following his diagnosis.

He attributed the early symptoms of IPF to his increasing age and decreasing fitness levels.

" I just thought I was getting older and you're just short of breath, puffing when you walked up a big flight of stairs or carrying a toolbox," John said.

"When you're getting over 60, you sort of think this is normal, and then you compare it to other people, and you think I'm not fit anymore.

"Until it sort of sneaks up on you a bit more, and a bit more, and then you think maybe I should get this checked."

John feels like there may be an improvement to his condition, but he understands that he may be receiving the placebo.

"At the end of the day, it will be beneficial for somebody else in the future. It gives them more options for medications."

Liaison office a safe place to help close the gap



A vibrant and dedicated space in the hospital is making a meaningful and positive impact on support, access and the overall patient journey for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

During Closing the Gap Day celebrations on 19 March at Mackay Base Hospital, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Liaison Office was officially opened by Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) Chief Executive Sean Birgan and Board Chair Monica McKendry.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Executive Director Kerry Maley said it was a proud and meaningful day to officially open the office, and a valuable reminder that Closing the Gap is not only a national priority, but a shared responsibility across the organisation every day.

The new office space is next to Mackay Base Hospital's main entrance on Bridge Road.

It is decorated with Health Equity artwork to provide a highly visible, welcoming and culturally-safe environment where patients, families and community members can seek support, share concerns and receive culturally appropriate information and assistance from the hospital liaison team.

"This space recognises the extraordinary work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health liaison team, who walk alongside local patients and families during some of their most vulnerable moments," Ms Maley said.

"They advocate, guide and support people to navigate a complex health system with compassion, cultural understanding and respect."

Health liaison officers help to build trust, strengthen communication, improve health outcomes and, most importantly, help create a hospital environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients feel safe, respected and heard, she said.

"This space has become a central one-stop hub for patient support, strengthening coordination between the hospital liaison team, transport officers and the Better Connected Care (BCC) team to deliver a more holistic and responsive approach to care," Ms Maley said.

"The space also offers a safe yarning place for Elders and a comfortable waiting area for patients who may experience anxiety when accessing hospital services.

"The hospital liaison office encourages drop-in visits, allowing for greater support, feedback and information sharing with our mob."

The office space helps improve engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients and addresses barriers such as failure to attend appointments and discharge

against medical advice through early connection, trust-building and support.

The office also supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit staff by providing an environment for debriefing, cultural reflection and knowledge sharing, Ms Maley said.

"Essentially, this hospital liaison space serves to strengthen culturally safe practice within the hospital, improve the patient experience and reinforce our commitment to delivering respectful, inclusive and equitable care for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."

The celebration was attended by Health Equity Advisory members Uncle Harold, Uncle Shane and Aunty Jenny, who provide cultural authority, leadership and guidance to help strengthen both the health service and community. Members of the HHS Executive Leadership team, Mackay Hospital and Health Board Chair Monica McKendry, and Board members Bill Cooper and Andrea Ranson also attended the event.

National Close the Gap Day reflects the priorities of the Closing the Gap National Agreement, which calls for genuine partnership, shared decision-making and accountability in improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

While there has been progress, significant disparities remain, Ms Maley said.

"As a health service, we are committed to embedding health equity into everything we do, and today's celebration and opening of the health liaison office reaffirm our collective commitment to achieving health equity, genuine partnership and Closing the Gap."


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1. Alissa Wano, Tyler Little, Noeleen Madrill, Maria Tomarra, Kylie Sinn and Kaylee McKellar.

2. Carina McPhee, Debbie Barra, John Kennell, Aunty Jenny Binsiar, Dr Charles Pain and Kerry Maley.

3. Kaylee McKellar, Uncle Arnold Doyle and Kerry Maley.

4. Monica McKendry chats to Maria Tomarra, Kaylee McKellar, Tyler Little and Kylie Sinn in the HLO.

5. Peta-Maree France, Kerry Maley, Jacki Whittaker, Shane Andrews, a JCU representative, Janet Geisler and Aunty Jenny Binsiar.

6. Sean Birgan and Monica McKendry.

7. Peta-Maree France and Jenny Farley.

Chili and Tali offer patients taste of home in a clinical space

Two sisters with four legs make for a 'pawsitive tail' of family connection as therapy dogs Tali and Chili bring comfort and connection to patients at Mackay Base Hospital.

In a unique family partnership, Tali and Chili don't just share the same parents. They're also part of a new father-and-daughter therapy dog handling team which is dedicated to brightening hospital days.

Clinical nurse and registered therapy dog handler Claire Cox has been visiting hospital wards with Tali for over a year. Now her dad, retired teacher turned therapy dog handler Paul Kelly, has joined the program with Chili making it a truly special family affair.

Tali has become a familiar and much-loved presence across the hospital as she delivers a wagging tail and unconditional love to patients, families and staff. Her bubbly personality has a remarkable way of lifting spirits, easing worries, sparking smiles and turning even the toughest days into something a little brighter, Claire said.

Now, with Chili officially joining the team after her first visit to the hospital on Monday 23 March, the sisters are doubling their impact. Together, they're visiting five adult wards across the hospital and reaching an even wider group of patients thanks to support from the Mackay Hospital Foundation and as part of the Eat Walk Engage program.

For Claire, the therapy dogs bring a sense of home into what can often feel like a clinical and confronting environment.

"Tali comes in every week and gives patients love and cuddles offering just a little bit of home in a place that can feel very clinical," she said.

The benefits are profound. For patients nearing end of life, a visit from Tali or Chili can create one of their final happy memories. For those living with dementia, the dogs provide a calming presence, helping to ground and settle them during a confusing and difficult time. For others, the visits unlock cherished memories of beloved pets, often bringing tears of joy and moments of reflection.

Facilitator Lauren Beauzec said the Eat Walk Engage program was intended to improve older patient care in hospital and reduce the incidence of hospital complications, like delirium.

"One of the things that make a really big difference is that opportunity for engagement, something meaningful to do while they are in hospital," she said.

"Patients often tell us they would really love some animal-assisted activities. A lot of people have their own animals at home that they've had to leave while they are in hospital, so it's lovely to see them connect with the therapy dogs here."

Tali and Chili, both highly trained and certified therapy dogs, also thrive on the attention and affection they receive on their visits to the wards.

"I think the dogs love it just as much as the patients do. It's a really mutually enjoyable time for everybody," Lauren said.

Even staff feel the impact.

"As a nurse, I know how stressful this job can be," Claire said.

> **"Being able to bring a little piece of joy into the workplace is such a blessing."**

Paul's involvement adds another layer of connection. With a lifetime of experience as a teacher, he and Chili bring warmth, conversation and relatability, particularly for patients who may not receive many visitors.

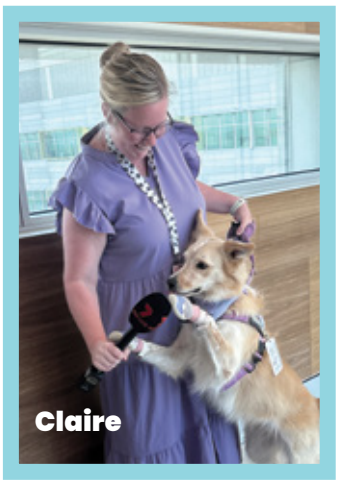
Together the therapy dog team is helping transform the hospital experience. Patients who are often facing some of the hardest moments of their lives are given a chance to smile, to reminisce, and to feel comforted, Claire said.

As the sisters continue their rounds at the hospital, tails wagging in unison, they're not just visiting patients having a 'ruff' time.

They're also strengthening a story of family, compassion and the simple, powerful joy and love that a dog can bring.









Julie delivers on commitment to local women and families



Tatiana Cummings and Michael Levi with baby Hailey, back left, Zoe Branch and right, Julie Pratt.

For more than 17 years, Mackay Birth Centre midwife Julie Pratt has been supporting local women and families through one of the biggest transitions and moments in their lives.

She knew she wanted a career helping and caring for others, so nursing seemed like a natural choice.

After completing her Bachelor of Nursing in 2003, Julie was encouraged to pursue post-graduate studies in midwifery, a path which quickly proved the perfect fit.

Julie began her career at Mackay Base Hospital and eagerly accepted a role at the Mackay Birth Centre in 2009.

"I've always been passionate about supporting women with low-risk pregnancies to birth their babies with as little intervention as possible, in a space that feels warm, calm and homely," Julie said.

"For me, this role is far more than a job. It's a genuine commitment to the women and families in our community, something which I care deeply about.

"Since 2017, I've held medication endorsement, which allows me to prescribe some medications and scans if required during pregnancy and labour, supporting women throughout pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period with an expanded scope of practice."

Julie said sharing a woman's journey into motherhood was incredibly rewarding and an absolute privilege.

"To be part of that journey from their very first appointment at around 14 weeks all the way to birth and beyond their postnatal phase is so fulfilling and is what has kept me here for so long," she said.

> **"Midwives walk alongside women, build mutual relationships with a common goal at one of the most important and vulnerable times in their lives, offering support, trust, reassurance and expert care every step of the way.**

"It's also why so many of our birth centre mums return to use our service again; there's a genuine sense of connection and community here that makes it truly special to be part of."

Julie fondly remembers the first birth she assisted at the centre; like many others since, it created a long and enduring connection with those she cared for.

"I've had several women who I've helped birth their first, second, third baby at the birth centre," she said.

"I've had women contact me as soon as they receive a positive pregnancy test, sometimes before telling their partners, because having a birth centre birth means so much to them."

The Mackay Birth Centre was established in 1994 for low-risk pregnant women experiencing an uncomplicated pregnancy who wanted a natural birth in a home-like environment.

The birth centre model of care, which is currently offered in a dedicated birth suite in the Women's Health Unit at the Mackay Base Hospital due to redevelopment plans, aims to make giving birth as natural and comfortable as possible.

Natural methods of pain relief are encouraged and mothers are supported to feel empowered and express their needs freely.

"Another benefit of the service is that, providing mother and baby are well, they are likely to be back at home very quickly," Julie said.

"Supporting women to rest, recover and begin life with their newborn in the comfort of their own home is a really special part of what we offer."

MACKAY BIRTH CENTRE

To find out more about the model of care available, please contact Mackay Birth Centre on (07) 4885 6933.

Celebration reflects success improving health gap



A vibrant cultural and community event has celebrated a decade of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to make healthier lifestyle choices.

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) marked 10 years of the Deadly Choices program at a celebration held at Victoria Park State School on 15 April which featured various health promotion stalls, cultural activities such as weaving, jumping castles and an animal farm.

The event brought together local elders, community members, groups and organisations, partners and hospital and healthcare staff to reflect on the Deadly Choices program's success in helping to close the health gap.

Mackay HHS Executive Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Kerry Maley said the milestone represented both a proud achievement and an opportunity to look ahead.

"In 2015, Mackay HHS became the first and only hospital service in Australia to receive the Deadly Choices licence," Mrs Maley said.

"This was a significant step in strengthening our commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across our region."

Deadly Choices is Australia's leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preventative health program, developed by the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH) in 2010 to empower First Nations people to take control of their health.

A key message of the program is the importance of completing an annual 715 Health Check to support early detection, prevention and better long-term health outcomes.

Mrs Maley said the anniversary also demonstrated the strength and sustainability of community-controlled models and reflected an important shift from reactive treatment to proactive, lifestyle-based prevention.

Since launching locally, Mackay HHS has delivered more than 27 community events across the Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday regions, including in Proserpine, Bowen, Moranbah, Collinsville, Clermont, Sarina, Dysart and Mackay.

The program has also made a strong impact in schools, with the Healthy Lifestyle Program delivered in more than 50 private and public high schools and primary schools, reaching over 3,000 Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander students.

Deadly Choices officers supported many young people from Year 5 through to Year 12, helping to inspire healthier futures and strong cultural role models.

Mrs Maley acknowledged the many staff members and James Cook University fourth-year medical students who have supported the program over the years and worked closely with stakeholders, community members and traditional owners to develop and strengthen meaningful relationships.

"Their willingness to attend community events, share their knowledge and engage with our communities has been invaluable," she said.

"Through this work, they have built strong relationships with community organisations and connected with Traditional Custodians across our region."

The program has also been supported by dedicated ambassadors, including the 10-year anniversary celebration special guest, Australian professional women's rugby league player Tallisha Harden, who inspires communities through her leadership and advocacy.

A highlight of the celebration was the acknowledgement of Aunty Joan, whose unwavering commitment to the program over the past decade has made a lasting impact.

"Aunty Joan has been a dedicated part of Deadly Choices, always giving her time, support and encouragement," Mrs Maley said.

"Her warmth and generosity have made a meaningful difference to our team and the communities we serve."

Special guests include Member for Mackay Nigel Dalton and Mackay Regional Council councillor Namarca Corowa.

> **"As we celebrate 10 years of Deadly Choices, we reflect with pride on how far we've come — but we also look forward to the future," Mrs Maley said.**

"Together, with our staff, partners and community, thank you to everyone who has been part of this journey."









1. Cr Namarca Corowa, Emma Hess, Sean Birgan and Uncle Philip Kemp. 2. ATSICHS Mackay - Yaza Stephen and Jardine Bobongie. 3. Donna Contor. 4. Emma Hess, Sean Birgan, Kerry Maley and Jessika Maley.













Mackay Institute of Research and Innovation



ED clinical trial to test new treatment for concussion

Mackay HHS's Dr Olurotimi Akinola, Alta Neethling and Dr Sofola-Orukotan.

Patients with mild traumatic brain injury, commonly known as concussion, frequently present to the Mackay Base Hospital Emergency Department (ED) with varying severity and duration of symptoms.

In what is the first commercial clinical trial for the ED, the randomised double-blind, placebo-controlled study will investigate the safety and effectiveness of an investigational drug treatment to treat the symptoms of concussion.

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) Senior Medical Officer (Emergency) and clinical trial lead Dr Sunday Sofola-Orukotan said that while concussion can happen to anyone, and anywhere, it is seen more frequently with high-contact sports.

"When you are in an environment where there is a lot of sporting activities, particularly with rugby, it's very common. The rate of presentation of head injuries increases during the rugby season." Dr Sofola-Orukotan said.

And it's frequently seen also as a result of falls and slips according to Senior Medical Officer (Emergency) and sub-investigator for the trial, Dr Olurotimi Akinola.

"We see it often in elderly patients. That's why a study like this is important because it gives us the opportunity to investigate whether the treatment may improve recovery outcomes." Dr Akinola said.

While most patients recover within a few days, some experienced persistent symptoms such as headaches, dizziness and trouble with concentration and memory.

"We see people who come in with postconcussive syndrome, when they have it for months and throughout this period it's affecting their livelihood. It's affecting day-to-day activities, and I think part of the benefit would be if we're able to shorten those symptoms." Dr Akinola said.

Patients interested in taking part in the study will be screened while in ED and must meet the eligibility criteria and have full capacity to provide informed consent.

The first dose of the medication will be given within 12 hours of injury while the patient is in ED, with subsequent doses to be self-administered at home.

"They are expected to come back to the hospital on day three, day five and day 10 and then day 30, so there will be a total of four visits." Dr Sofola-Orukotan said.

Dr Sofola-Orukotan gained previous experience in clinical trials during his training in Nigeria, where he collected data for a study into the use of an antifibrinolytic agent to reduce bleeding in traumatic brain injury.

"When this came up, I said 'Look, this is similar to what I've done before', but I see it as an opportunity to do something in addition to that. It's an opportunity to bring this type of research to the Mackay region for our patients and for me to gain further experience in the field of clinical trials.

"This will be my first time of being a principal investigator, so I see it as a challenge." Dr Sofola-Orukotan said.

Similarly, colleague Dr Akinola also has previous research in the field.

"This research was particularly interesting because we've both done some work around rugby and sports a bit, and in ED you see patients that have this kind of injury a lot," he said.

"The question is how long? You see people coming back with symptoms and still asking questions. A lot is still not known around this area,"

> **Launching a clinical trial in a busy ED is no small feat – it requires a collaborative team effort from triage nurses, doctors, medical imaging and pathology staff and the clinical trials unit, Dr Sofola-Orukotan said.**

"It will be good for our career development, and I think overall for the department, as well as for the hospital. I believe that at the end of the day, interest in research and clinical trials from the emergency department will increase because people will see the benefit of it," he said.

"Once you gain this experience, wherever you find yourself, it is going to be part of you, even if you leave Mackay and go to other hospitals. They will look for people that have experience in research, rather than people that have not. So that's been my encouragement to our colleagues. Come on board, let's do this thing together. The more the merrier".

For more information, contact the Clinical Trials Unit on 4885 6788 or Mackay-Clinical-Trials@health.qld.gov.au

Patient story



New service provides prompt, specialist care to cancer patients

Medical and Oncology RAS clinical nurse consultants Skye Buttle and Elouise Studt



Reassurance and timely specialised medical care are important when you're undergoing cancer treatment.

So when Mt Pleasant woman Janice Morris, pictured above, became extremely unwell in between her chemotherapy treatments recently, it was reassuring to know advice and help were available quickly.

Mackay Base Hospital's Medical Oncology Rapid Access Service (RAS) is improving access to care, the experience of patients and helping to reduce unnecessary presentations to the Emergency Department (ED).

Janice was diagnosed with stage two breast cancer in December after discovering a lump in her breast. Further tests revealed cancer in both breasts and her lymph nodes. The months ahead involved intensive treatment, including eight rounds of chemotherapy.

During a scheduled break in treatment last month, Janice's blood pressure dropped dangerously low.

"I wasn't sure what to do," she said. "But I knew it wasn't right. I couldn't get out of bed without falling over," she said.

Rather than waiting and worrying or presenting and waiting at the ED, Janice made a call to the Oncology RAS, where acting clinical nurse consultant Elouise Studt listened carefully and acted quickly.

"She told me to come into the clinic straight away," Janice said. "I was seen immediately and then reviewed by the oncologist."

That phone call ended with Janice being admitted to the hospital for four days, where she received the care she needed at a critical time.

"When you're going through chemotherapy, it's incredibly comforting to know help and advice are there when you need it," she said.

"You're not sitting in Emergency waiting. You're seen straight away, and they already know your treatment and your history."

Now starting her next 12-week course of chemotherapy, Janice said knowing the RAS is available gives her peace of mind, and she encouraged others undergoing treatment to use it without hesitation.

"It's so easy to get the care or reassurance you need," she said. "That kind of support makes a hard journey just a little bit easier."

Mackay Hospital and Health Service (HHS) Chief Executive Sean Birgan said the Oncology RAS, which commenced in September, provided faster access to the right advice for patients with cancer-related concerns.

Since January, the Medical Oncology RAS has supported 58 patients and is predicted to have saved 59 ED presentations.

"Our services are now providing support for patients who have recently been in hospital in our surgical, medical, oncology and stroke wards," Mr Birgan said.

"The aim of these services is to ensure patients receive prompt, specialist-led care from teams who know their medical history."

The Medical Oncology RAS operates Monday to Friday between 8am and 3pm and calls are answered by highly experienced staff who can help resolve issues or advise patients when to come to the clinic or seek further help.

Feedback had been positive with patients appreciating the service, professional knowledge and ease of access to follow-up care.

The Medical Oncology RAS follows the success of previous rapid access initiatives in cardiology, post-operative and paediatric services.

Patients can be referred by phoning 4885 7048 or via email to MKY-medical-ras@health.qld.gov.au

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Mackay Hospital and Health Service

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