

# The India-Australia medical connection

There is a rich medical history that connects Australia and India, and one example can be found in Vellore, where the Christian Medical College and Hospital continues a long collaborative tradition with exchanges of staff and ideas. **Dr Chris Clohesy** reports on some of the links, and his own recent experiences in Vellore.

A rich medical history connects Australia and India. Over the years many doctors who have trained in India have worked in Australia and many doctors from Australia have travelled to India to work.

An example of this relationship is the remarkable connection between Adelaide and Christian Medical College (CMC) Hospital in Vellore, in Southern India. There are many doctors currently working in South Australia who trained in Vellore, and many doctors working in South Australia who have travelled to Vellore either as a medical student or clinician to work in CMC Hospital for a short time.

What has sustained this relationship? Christian Medical College Hospital was founded by the American missionary Dr Ida Scudder in the early 1900s. Ida Scudder devoted her entire life to developing the hospital.

She also recognised, early in her career, the need for training Indian women to address the medical needs of women of India. As a result, she started a medical school for women in Vellore. Over the past 100 years the hospital has grown to be a major hospital with 2,500 beds, and the medical school, with an intake of both men and women, is world renowned. Despite Christianity being a minor religion in India, the hospital and medical school have maintained their Christian heritage.

In a country where there is no Medicare safety net and the ability to pay can determine level of care, CMC Hospital uses funds raised from patients who can afford to pay, and from funds raised by 'Friends of Vellore' societies around the world, to care for the many thousands

of patients who cannot afford health care. As a result, the hospital's reputation attracts patients not only from all over India but from neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

Adelaide has an active 'Friends of Vellore' Society, currently chaired by Dr Lawrie Palmer, a palliative care specialist at Modbury Hospital. This group not only raises funds for the hospital but has a very important role in promoting the

Dr Palmer himself went to Vellore five years ago, and found it an "amazing experience", and particularly valuable for medical students.

Dr Prash Sanders, director of cardiac electrophysiology at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, agrees, noting that medical students who go to CMC will see signs that, in Australia, are often only sighted in textbooks. It can also be rewarding for doctors to go to Vellore and step outside their "comfort zone".

He has himself undertaken clinical work there, taking a team over prior to the hospital setting up its own electrophysiology services, headed up by Dr Bobby John, who came to the Royal Adelaide Hospital to do his training.

Dr Sanders remembers his time at Vellore vividly. Hospital staff would put the word out that his team was in town, and they would have a "huge line of cases".

"It is intense, you are exhausted, you feel like you need a holiday when you finish, but in fact the surprising thing is you actually get a lot more out of it than you put into it ... the people working in that institution are quite amazing for their dedication

to the institution, their dedication to the patients".

The work culture he has found there – the staff's pride in their hospital, and their passion, is something that Dr Sanders has sought to promote in his own department at the RAH.

The culture at CMC Vellore is also something that has stayed with Dr Benjamin D'Souza, who did his undergraduate and postgraduate training there. He now works at the Women's and Children's Hospital as a paediatric ►



relationship between CMC Hospital and the medical community in Adelaide.

Dr Palmer notes that many Australian doctors go to Vellore to visit and offer their skills for programs that are being set up there, to share ideas and to learn, and a number of CMC doctors come to Adelaide to extend their skills. Some of these doctors have done "pioneering work" in both Adelaide and Vellore, with the example of Queen Elizabeth Hospital renal transplant surgeon Dr Mohan Rao springing to mind.

emergency physician, and his wife, Lynda, who also trained in Vellore, is an anaesthetist at the Lyell McEwin Hospital. He describes his training at CMC as the “best years” of his life, citing the level of training provided to students, and the ethos there.

“I am extremely grateful to Vellore for what it has done for me because, yes, it makes you a doctor, but it makes you more than that,” he states.

The holistic approach he found at CMC Vellore has stayed with him. Although now based in Adelaide, enjoying the quieter lifestyle it offers, he is still interested to return to Vellore regularly in the future, to give back some of what it gave to him.



It has been sad to see the current tensions arising between India and Australia as a result of the attacks on Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney. The assaults have quite rightly attracted widespread media condemnation in India and Australia. In 2009, 70,000 Indian students studied in Australia, but the number of Indian people applying for student visas to Australia has plummeted by half, according to the most recent figures from the immigration department.

In the face of this tension, the Adelaide medical community, with our strong links with the Indian medical community, has an important role to play to promote the relationship with India. Our connection with CMC Hospital is a good example of

how we can foster this relationship.

This year, two paediatric registrars from CMC Hospital will be working at the Women’s and Children’s Hospital (WCH), after which they will return to India. We need to continue to promote these rotations. We also need to encourage our medical students to undertake electives in India. In *medicSA* last year (June 2009 issue), Chris Wong, a fifth-year medical student at the University of Adelaide wrote about his visit to CMC Hospital, which was supported by an elective grant from the AMA(SA), reporting that it was a very memorable learning experience.

Another way to contribute is by providing medical education. Recently, Health Serve Australia has made a request for medical educators to help deliver a postgraduate diploma in family medicine from CMC Hospital in Vellore. Health Serve Australia was established in 2004 to assist with health needs in developing countries. However, the focus is more on health development than disaster relief.

I travelled to CMC Hospital in November 2009 as a medical educator for the Diploma in Family Medicine program. What an amazing experience: first travelling to Vellore from Chennai and then seeing the fantastic work doctors and nurses are doing at CMC Hospital. Huge numbers of patients attending the hospital everyday puts massive pressure on the system.

It was great to see Dr Anil Kuruvilla, a previous registrar at WCH, now director

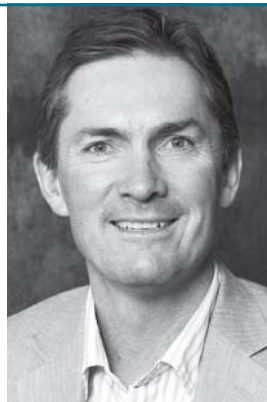


of the Neonatal ICU unit at CMC. I also met Dr Ji Ji Matthews, an obstetric consultant and previous obstetric registrar at WCH and Dr Anna Simon, oncology consultant and previous registrar at the WCH. It is professional links such as these that maintain the strong connection with Adelaide and CMC Hospital. I also visited a smaller hospital in Vellore, CHAD, that offers free health care to the very poor.

My time at Vellore was an incredible experience, and I can only urge others to consider going and getting involved, offering what help you can – and do not be surprised to find that you have gained more from the experience than you have given.

*For more information about Health Serve Australia, and medical educators for India, see the Health Serve website, at [www.healthserve.org](http://www.healthserve.org). Dr Chris Clohesy is a general practitioner and AMA(SA) councillor. Additional reporting by Eva O’Driscoll.*

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