An advocate for youth health

Cate Swannell

doi: 10.5694/mja17.0304C1

*Dr Jane Cooper was the RACGP’s GP of the Year in 2016. She’s an advocate for early intervention and embedding deeply into the community she serves*

JANE Cooper had to travel far and wide from her Devonport, Tasmania, home just to find out that Devonport was exactly where she needed to be.

Dr Cooper, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners’ (RACGP) GP of the Year in 2016, was the first in her blue-collar family to go to university. It was a big deal.

“At 18 I packed up and left home for the first time,” Dr Cooper tells the *MJA*. “I was anxious about it. At that time (1987) not a lot of kids from my area were going on to tertiary education. There wasn’t a university in the northwest of Tasmania then, so it was off to Hobart, which seemed like a very big place to me.

“Now, of course we have the University of Tasmania Rural Clinical School in Burnie.”

Medicine seemed like a good fit. Her mother was working in a doctor’s surgery and on weekends young Jane had been doing some reception and filing work. It was experience that would later influence the kind of GP she became.

“I saw firsthand the way a very traditional kind of general practice operated and that had a lot of impact on me as it turned out.”

Traditional meant home visits, continuity of care, consistency and knowing the patients and the community, Dr Cooper realises now.

“I loved everything about medicine — nothing really stood out for me, although initially I had an interest in emergency medicine and obstetrics,” she says. “But the more obstetrics I did, the more I realised that I either had to do it all the time and really study it, or just do a bit of it as part of a more general practice.”

After graduation, Dr Cooper spent 2 years at the old hospital in Burnie. “I decided to throw myself in at the deep end and learn as much as I could. Weekend shifts were 8 am to 10 pm.”

Then followed 6 months at the rural clinical school in Tamworth, New South Wales, doing her diploma in obstetrics before a death in the family drew her back to Devonport and a 9-month stint in a practice covering the Sheffield area in northern Tasmania.

Her student elective had involved a 3-month stay in Katherine in the Northern Territory, and it was to there she returned as a resident medical officer. “It was fabulous,” she says. “It was more exposure to a whole range of things, and I very much enjoyed Indigenous health, working in the remote communities.

“If it hadn’t been for the fact that I had a commitment to do some more obstetrics training in Toowoomba, I would have been very tempted to stay in Katherine.”

But that 6 months’ training in Toowoomba became a pivotal moment in Dr Cooper’s career path. “Other things in life happened and I completed my training in LaTrobe, Tasmania, before returning to Devonport to work in an 11-doctor general practice.

“After a few years, I began to get frustrated,” she says. “Even I began to feel like a number, like Devonport had nothing to offer.”

Conversations with a local youth worker opened the possibility of helping some “marginalised, complex kids”. Then Cathy McClure, the social worker at the local Year 11 and 12 school, Don College, suggested that there was a room available on the campus.

“At first I tried to get the principals at the 11-doctor practice to attach the campus clinic to their business, but it was just too hard for them,” says Dr Cooper. “Now I’m a business owner myself and I can see why it was hard, but then I got frustrated.”

So, in 2013 she went it alone. Literally.

“At first it was just me. I had an online booking system and it just took off. We had to market it in the classrooms, but the teachers were really excited about it and helped.”

Don Medical is now a three-doctor practice, including a location in Devonport’s CBD as well as on-campus at the college.

“We really see the social determinants of health at play,” says Dr Cooper. “Family breakdown, alcohol and drug problems, poverty. We get a lot of mental health presentations.

“For the first 6 months, it was really too hard, and I realised I had to work with, and access the community. We were a bulk-billing practice, and we couldn’t get funding. I got some work teaching part-time at the University of Tasmania, and that helped a little.

“But it was never about money,” she says. “I needed a place to work that allowed me to help young people, that allowed me to keep learning, and teaching.

“It was a struggle, but in the end I had to stop worrying about [money]. I realised that if you have a good philosophy – the right philosophy – in place, it will all balance out in the end.”

Balance is important to Jane Cooper. She is married to an optometrist who now is her business and IT manager, and they have three gorgeous kids aged 7, 9 and 11 years.

“I’m working full-time at the moment, but the goal is to step back a bit,” she says. “I work really hard at finding work/life balance. I see a personal trainer once a week, I’ve just started doing yoga, I take the dog for a walk every single day and we try to keep the weekends as free as possible.”

Being named as the RACGP’s GP of the year was “amazing”, Dr Cooper says.

“It very much affirmed to me that my approach to general practice can’t be too bad. It also allows me to further advocate for young people’s health and well-being.

“I’m a great believer in early intervention, and teenagers do listen, we can make a difference for them.”

Dr Cooper says that very often her fellow GPs don’t appreciate the influence they can have on the community around them.

“Some days it’s hard, and it can feel like you’re on a hamster wheel, but if you lift your head and look around, you can see that you can bring about change in the community.

“I hope to inspire students and registrars about general practice. It’s an amazing life.