



DR HARRISON GARRETT, ROSE AND NURSE KAHLI SILVER

# Medics on Wheels

Street Side Medics is on a mission: to deliver healthcare to people experiencing homelessness in Western Sydney, with the goal of doing likewise nationwide.

by **Daniel Nour**

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**B**lacktown is teeming with pharmacies, GP clinics, medical centres and all the requisite facilities of health care. On Blacktown Road, they're hard to miss, and just two minutes away stands Blacktown Hospital, that major in-patient care facility of Sydney's western suburbs.

But on this cold Saturday, it's not the town centre but Blacktown's Alpha Park that plays host to a mobile medical service for people experiencing life on the margins. A van serves as a free clinic, with a row of folding chairs its waiting room.

Needles, vaccines, dressings, electrocardiography and ultrasound machines, cannulas and all manner of medications, including antibiotics, penicillin, blood thinners and other prescriptions, line the walls of the van. This is not some no-frills sick bay for casual care; this is a state-of-the-art, fully equipped medical facility that happens to be parked next to a tennis court.

The brainchild of 27-year-old Dr Daniel Nour, the 2022 Young Australian of the Year (who, providentially, shares my name), Street Side Medics is here to support anyone needing medical care and health advice.

Rose, a Mauritian woman in her sixties, with a wide smile and a calm voice, has just had a consultation.

"I have high blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol," she says. "The quality of care here is top. Everyone is welcome and they see everyone the same. Here you are welcomed with a smile like a family and, before they give you medication, they check what is going on first and ask about your story."

This van is one of two – with a third on the way – that services communities in Blacktown, Parramatta, Manly, Woolloomooloo, Surry Hills, Hornsby and, shortly, Wollongong. The beauty of being on wheels meant a van could also be sent to Lismore to assist during the flood crisis.

"When I looked at all the different challenges [in Sydney] the solution I thought of was...taking the service to them, removing as many barriers as we can," says Dr Nour, who launched the service in 2020. The idea was planted a year earlier when, walking home after his shift at Imperial College London's School of Medicine, he stopped to help a man having a seizure. When he asked one of the man's friends why he hadn't sought medical care earlier, she explained he would "never be taken seriously" in a hospital, because he was homeless.

"That really slapped me in the face," he says. "The [Australian] healthcare system is one of the best in the world... Our system is, however, under some stress and is tailored to the majority of our population. It is not tailored to minority populations. This includes the homeless population."

Street Side Medics overcomes these barriers to access by taking its vans to the people themselves, working with existing community organisations. Here today, One Meal are loading up plates as well as offering fruit and other items, including blankets and teddy bears for children. They're staffed by volunteers, young and old and from all ethnicities. Other community groups, such as the Hare Krishna movement, have also set up food stalls in the park.

It's a system that works for Rose. "I come here every Saturday, and [the first time] I came for the food service," she says. "It's good because when you go to the medical centre you have to wait, but here you can have quick service."

The vans are run by two teams of volunteers. Outside the van, a social worker and other health professionals approach people about their health concerns. Inside the van, a GP and a nurse wait to see the patients.

"What we do outside the van, talking to people, is just as important as what we do inside," says David Ballhausen, Street Side Medics CEO. "What the doctors love is that they can take their time. Nobody is counting the minutes."

Today, he is particularly worried about a young woman with a recurring health issue, who's here with her partner. "She had some serious blood results but as she has some addiction issues, now is not a good time," he says hurriedly. "With situations like that you don't

give up, so I've offered to pick them up or, as an alternative, to come to our clinic in Parramatta tomorrow night. [I said to him], 'Come on down man, we need to see your partner.'"

It's the precarity of people's living situations that makes ongoing care difficult, despite Street Side Medics' informal, walk-in, "come as you are" approach.

"People are couch surfing or living in temporary accommodation, and some have social housing," Ballhausen says. You can sense his deeper frustration with the systemic challenges people experiencing homelessness face every day to access their most essential needs.

Access to bulk billing, capacity for travel to medical clinics, the cost of specialist consults, documentation requirements, stigma, embarrassment and a rigidly



ROSE CONSULTS WITH DR HARRISON IN THE VAN



"SOME PEOPLE JUST WANT TO HAVE A CHAT," SAYS DR HARRISON, "AND THAT LEADS US TO GIVING THEM A TREATMENT."



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structured appointment system are just some of the roadblocks that the Street Side Medics team are trying so hard to veer around.

“The assumption many of us carry around in our heads is that primary health care is really accessible, and yet what we’re seeing is how it’s becoming harder and harder to get,” Ballhausen says. “So you peer into communities, see where they are ready to gather and say it’s free and no appointment required. You don’t need to tell us who you are let alone have a Medicare card.”

Federal health minister Mark Butler recently acknowledged that “primary care is in its worst shape since Medicare began”, with basic health care becoming increasingly unaffordable, especially for those on low incomes or with complex conditions. According to the Department of Health and Aged Care, only 35 per cent of specialist consultations were bulk billed in 2020-21, with less affluent people disproportionately affected by these fees.

For Dr Shanthini Seelan, who has been practising for 25 years, the visa status of some of her patients prohibits their access to Medicare. At her regular practice in the Sydney suburb of Toongabbie, five different languages are spoken and the clinic is focused on refugee health for Afghan, Sri Lankan and Iranian arrivals.

“I just saw a Sri Lankan refugee,” says Dr Seelan. “He had a very swollen hand and he doesn’t have access to GPs. It was quite painful for him.

“He’s been living here for 12 years. I’ve asked him to come and see me. In Western Sydney we are very multicultural and we have wall-to-wall GPs that do pro bono care.”

Like some of the other doctors who volunteer their time with Street Side medics, Dr Seelan came across the service through news reports.

“I read an article by Dr Daniel and I was blown away. He is a visionary,” she says.

“Dr Daniel says that you start with sympathy, then empathy and then you go to compassion. Everyone here has the right to decent, safe health care,” she says in a rare moment of quiet between patients.

“We don’t judge, and even if it’s a stop-gap or a bandaid solution, if it makes your life a little better, then that’s why we’re here. Our patients need someone in their corner who doesn’t judge and who gives them the help they need.”

Looking around today, it’s clear that there is a sense of community. A young girl is playing on a swing, volunteers are laughing, pouring hot drinks or serving up plates, and the patients themselves are unhurried, waiting near or around the van while eating or chatting.

It’s a system that the Street Side team plans to roll out nationwide. “Within five years we’ll be in every capital city and in every population centre,” Dr Ballhausen says. “We will demonstrate what is possible.” ■

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