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LEARNING AND TEACHING BY DOING**

*Eileen Mosely and
Jeanette Turner

About sixty Aboriginal men and women health workers attended courses held at their training centre in Alice Springs during 1978.# They came from Alice Springs itself, from cattle stations, settlements and missions scattered over the centre of Australia, more than half a million square miles.

Each community chooses its own health workers, who may not be able to read and write before training, but they understand sickness in their community. They can communicate with their own people more readily than the European nursing sisters, who do not share tribal beliefs and languages.

Teaching takes place in several areas of the building. There are three classrooms, open space library areas with video equipment, a media room, demonstration room, two kitchens, lounges and other facilities.

There are three streams of trainees. Each group comes into Alice Springs every sixth week for a week's instruction in basic health, community nursing skills, literacy and numeracy. While learning these, they live in the training centre, in their own sleeping quarters, adapted to suit Aboriginal customs. European culture is available in the provision of hospital food and in the craftwork and television on hand for spare time between sessions.

During the year, health workers and staff learned together about diabetes, diarrhoea and dehydration, good nutrition and malnutrition, respiratory problems, ear infections, accidents and

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Courses were held in 1976 at Warrabri, and in 1977 at Alice Springs Community Health Centre. Everyone was pleased when, on 20.2.78, the health workers moved into their own training centre.

injuries to eyes, trachoma, the unconscious patient, venereal diseases, dental health, boils, burns, snakebite, and the stages of labour in pregnancy, with visits to the labour ward at Alice Springs Hospital. As the trainees ask for topics to be included in the next course, they are introduced. Then they make a poster about the topic to take back to their communities. This is fun, after learning the medical facts and studying slides and films.

The teaching doctors and sisters also learn from the trainees about bush medicines and traditional methods, as in the use of native plants for inhalations for colds. The trips out of Alice on barbecues find everyone learning more about the bush, as the Aboriginal men and women show how to collect and use various medicines and tucker.

All staff know something of the four main languages in the area. These are Walbiri, Aranda, Pintubi and Pitjantjatjara. The saying, "Respect a person, respect his language", means something here. The teaching is in English, due to the variety of language groups.

In the clinic sessions the trainees learn why they carry out certain steps back home. For instance, an elementary model of the lung demonstrates when tipped low, how fluid can be drained from the lung by positioning the patient correctly. Then the health workers understand postural drainage and 'bang bangs'. The trainees have their skills checked by the teaching staff, and by visiting rural health sisters who attend to understand what is happening in the training program. These sisters gain confidence in the health workers, and recognise their own teaching role in the rural scene.

Some of the trainees learn how to read and write while they are here. Others who know this already, learn to read more confidently, and write more clearly and with more power. These are important skills, and the staff follow up with practice examples in homework booklets. This year, some trainees learned how to tell the time, how to count, add and subtract. Such learning is for something useful in their work - how to work out weight loss in diarrhoea, how to read the thermometer, how to write the date, what to say over the radio-telephone, and such like.

The preparation of teaching materials needs care so that they will suit the health workers and their communities. This is a joint effort of the training centre's staff, with staff and resources of the Institute of Aboriginal Development. With all this material, added to the artifacts trainees have chosen to bring to their training place, the centre has taken on its own Aboriginal identity, where the student health workers feel very much at home.

To know more about everything, they visited interesting places around Alice, such as the Flying Doctor Base, the Telecom Building, the Bakery, the Old-Timers' Home, and Yirara College.

There's always much to do at home after a week at the centre because, as one health worker, Trudy Inkamala said, "It's not only me, but all my community that's taking this course."

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