

Heart health on wheels

When engineer-turned-cardiologist, Dr Rolf Gomes thought up the idea to create a cardiology clinic on wheels, complete with a reception area, testing room and two private clinics, most of his friends thought he was crazy.

Three years later, a second clinic is in development and while he says it hasn't always been easy, it's definitely been worth it.



Dr Rolf Gomes

The Heart of Australia, or 'the heart bus' as it is affectionately known, is a 25 metre long, custom designed clinic-on-wheels, driven by a semi-trailer.

Trucking on average 10,000 kilometres per month, the heart bus rolls into 12 towns in rural and remote Queensland per fortnight – averaging 310 clinic days per year.

On board is a cardiologist, sonographer, medical aide, medical students and operations manager, with teams spending up to seven days on the road at a time, before rotating.

This innovative approach to frontline medical service is playing a vital part in bridging the gap of distance. A gap that sees many Australians living in remote areas forgo much needed specialist assistance.

According to the National Heart Foundation, people living in rural and remote areas are 44 per cent more likely to die of heart disease than people living in urban areas.

“A lack of access to specialist services in regional and remote areas plays a significant role in that figure.

“If you live in the city and have a pain in your chest, you can easily see a general practitioner, who could then refer you to a cardiologist and if they thought it was your heart, refer you to have some tests done, all within a day. If you are in the middle of nowhere, there isn't that option.

“A lot of patients who come to the bus can't afford to travel or they have a sick spouse or they are in jobs that are hard to get away from – they might be in the

middle of planting a crop – and they just won't be able to get away as easily as other people. So going to The Heart Bus makes a huge difference.

“In a lot of these communities they see services stripped away constantly. A reinjection of any service, especially health, means so much. They look at this truck and even though it's not made of bricks and mortar, it's there every fortnight. It makes them feel like someone gives a damn and has gone out of their way to do something for the bush,” explained Dr Gomes.

Dr Gomes first had the idea for the bus during his registrar training, when he started to see the importance of not only transporting specialists to rural areas, but their equipment too.

“The practice of medicine nowadays, involves more than just a stethoscope – we need equipment to help us do our job.

“As cardiologists, we use treadmills, stress testing machines, ultrasound machines and heart monitoring machines.

“I started to think – if we are going to go out to see people in remote areas then it would be good to take our equipment with us,” explained Dr Gomes.

With a background in engineering, Dr Gomes designed the bus from scratch.

“I say to people that building the truck was the easiest part, the logistics of delivering the service is a beast. But when you're in the middle of nowhere and the patients turn up, and you make a lifesaving diagnosis it makes it all worthwhile.

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You suddenly realise how essential the service is for those people.”

Dr Gomes recalls one of the first patients he saw on the heart bus in 2014.

“I was in St George in remote Queensland and I saw a patient who had worked all his life as a shearer. He didn’t smoke or drink but had some family history of heart disease and was diabetic.

“I remember the conversation because I asked him if he had had chest pain, heart palpitations or had been blacking out and he said to me ‘not really doctor, the only thing is, I go for a jog along the Balonne River every

morning and I get this terrible feeling that something bad is going to happen if I don’t stop.’

“I was able to say to him – you have identified a few of the risk factors and we have the option to do a stress test right now on the bus.

“He got on the treadmill and within about three of four minutes it was pretty obvious that there was a significant issue there.

“It was just fantastic to get the letter back from Prince Charles Hospital where I had referred him to say that he had had his angiogram and they had found multiple blockages and he

had been listed Category One for open heart surgery.

“He is a gentleman who would never have been able to see a cardiologist and probably would have dropped dead one morning running along the Balonne.

“He’s probably alive because of that simple fact that the truck rolled into town,” said Dr Gomes.

Dr Gomes encourages like-minded physicians to get in contact by email at: info@heartofaustralia.com ^{RQ}

To find out more visit:
www.heartofaustralia.com

