

KATHERINE HOSPITAL IN THE EARLY YEARS, OPENING TO WW2, 1931-1939

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ABSTRACT

The construction and function of a small hospital in the Australian outback three thousand kilometres from the nearest state capital city is described. Outback roads need to be experienced to have some idea of their variable quality and the difficulty of obtaining urgent medical attention. Hence the most unique feature about medicine in Katherine during the eight years prior to WW2 was the presence of a 'flying doctor'. Dr Clyde Fenton was not only a well-qualified doctor, but also a brilliant pilot who flew at any time of day or night, in atrocious weather, to remote locations on dark short rough landing strips to convey acutely sick patients to the best medical care available. Details of individual patients are mostly found in the Trove National Library archives. Predictably the most frequent health issues were various forms of trauma in men. The success of the medical and nursing staff in the indescribable, must be experienced outback, in spite of frequent obstruction or lack of cooperation from administration is much to be admired.

KEYWORDS

Australian 'outback'
Northern Territory
Katherine
Flying doctor
Remote medicine
Snake bites

Katherine, location

Katherine is a small town in the Northern Territory of Australia, three hundred and twenty kilometres southeast of Darwin situated on the Katherine River, after which it is named, and nearly three thousand kilometres from the nearest state capital, Adelaide.



Katherine in the
Australian
Northern
Territory

Katherine with an urban population of 5,980 at the 2021 Australia Census is the fourth largest settlement in the Territory. Another 5,000 people live in the surrounding area including the Tindall Airforce base. The region floods heavily during the wet season. The river flooded the town in 1931, 1940, 1957, 1998 and 2006, with the 1998 flood being the worst on record when the river reached a height of 20.4 metres.

History

The area was first colonised tens of thousands of years ago by the Dagoman Indigenous people and today a community of the Walpiri people is based at Katherine East.

The Scottish explorer John McDouall Stuart crossed the Katherine River ninety kilometres upstream from the present town in 1862 on his successful third journey across the continent from north to south. He named the river 'Katherine' after second daughter of pastoralist James Chambers.

Katherine began as an outpost established on the Trans Australian Telegraph Line when the Katherine Telegraph Station was opened on 22 August 1872 on the north-south transport route between Darwin and Adelaide. It further developed with the opening of nearby gold fields including Pine Creek ninety kilometres to the north. The North Australia Railway was extended to Katherine with construction beginning in 1923 of the Katherine railway bridge.

More recent local developments include a strategic military function with RAAF Base, Tindall and as a tourism gateway to the attractions of nearby Katherine Gorge and Nitmiluk National Park, and its many ancient rock paintings. Katherine is also a central hub of the great "Savannah Way" which stretches from Cairns in north Queensland to Broome in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.



Katherine Gorge

Katherine Hospital

Today Katherine District Hospital is a modern public hospital servicing the Katherine Region's people. It celebrated its ninetieth anniversary in 2024. It is located 3 km (1.9 mi) from the centre of town on the banks of the Katherine River, overlooking Knott's Crossing. The hospital has twice been evacuated due to water inundation during the floods in 1998 and 2006.

It services an area of 336,674 km² (129,991 sq mi), an area some 38% larger than the United Kingdom! In the 2011-2012 financial year, Katherine District Hospital conducted 440 elective surgeries and managed 14,311 Emergency Department presentations. Around 85%

percent of its patients are Aboriginal people, many from some of the most remote communities in Australia. Diabetes, dialysis and trauma are common among inpatients.

It has sixty beds including a medical ward where the author worked as locum physician a decade ago. The hospital also provides a 24-hour emergency department, a surgical ward with an operating theatre, maternity and paediatric wards, a renal dialysis unit, a pathology laboratory, and pharmacy plus a radiography department equipped to perform basic x-ray, ultrasound, and CT scans.



1998 – Katherine Hospital flooded, evacuated and closed

Katherine Hospital – the first hospital

Six years before it opened the Advisory Council for North Australia held a meeting at the office of the Government Resident to discuss health and sanitary

arrangements and transport of patients for the future Katherine Hospital.

1 Northern Territory Times 28/6/1928

Four years before the hospital opened, the town, which is famed for its wonderful dances, held their hospital fund raising ball on the night of the Katherine Cup.

2 Northern Standard 16/9/1930

A temporary emergency hospital was opened in Katherine in April 1931 during a combined epidemic of influenza and malaria, pending the design and construction of a permanent building. The vacant local school building and teacher's residence were commandeered, the school house was used as accommodation by the nursing sister, while the residence served as the hospital until December 1934.

3 A brief history of Katherine Hospital 1934-1994
Compiled by Jo Ascott on behalf of The Katherine Hospital Management Board to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the establishment of The 1930s: The Early Years

The Times congratulated the Katherine Hospital for reducing the number of relapses among fever cases in 1931 with immediate and skilled attention. The paper noticed one ignorant correspondent thinking that most relapses were caused by alcohol, a notable cause of various diseases, but not of fever. Indeed ninety percent of cases were abstainers and three were children.

The causes of fever were not stated or probably not known, but could have been common viral infections or possible tropical infections including dengue, malaria or melioidosis 4 Northern Territory Times 7/7/1931.

Sister Dwyer left Darwin by train to assume duties at the Katherine Hospital for a period of two months.
5 Northern Standard 26/1/1932.

A contributor to the Northern Standard complained that the Darwin Hospital is overstaffed, a consummation devoutly to be wish'd today indeed! Cecil Cook, Chief Medical Officer indicated that staff members are often absent relieving at the Katherine Hospital and this procedure necessitates the absence from Darwin for some days of one of the Darwin Staff.
6 Northern Standard 2/5/1933

Mr. R. M. Balding, of Katherine was the successful tenderer for the sanitary service for the Katherine Health area, presumably for the proposed new building.
7 Northern Standard 16/6/1933

It was reported in Darwin that Dr. McCann is shortly to proceed to Alice Springs to relieve Dr. D. R. Brown, who went on holidays. After Dr. Brown's holidays are completed it is stated he will commence duties at the Katherine.
8 Northern Standard 17/11/1933

Doctor Fothergill left Darwin by the mixed train to return to duties at Katherine.
9 Northern Standard 5/1/1934

Details of the proposed new Katherine Hospital were gazetted by The Northern Territory Government on 3 January 1934. Medical officers' quarters to have two main bedrooms 14.1ft x 14.1ft with 11ft walls and 12.1ft verandah right around erected on 61 concrete piers. The whole of the back verandah was to be divided off into kitchen, dining room, pantry and bathroom. Verandas were to be enclosed with lattice lattice of usual vertical type. Timber throughout to be Cyprus pine with exception of joinery and finishings.

Indigenous native wards consist of isolation hut of two rooms 10.1 x 12.1 a clinic hut 12.1 x 15.1 and one each female and male native nursing huts 14.1 x 16.1 all on ground level with concrete floors. Ample window and doors gave provision for light and air. Ample bath and earth closet accommodation was provided with provision for a septic tank for the hospital block of buildings.

A common theme throughout this paper and indeed most government health systems is the overriding of expert health care professionals by less knowledgeable and less qualified administrators. The latest global example this week being a hospital in Glasgow where an infected water supply led to deaths in the oncology unit, initially detected by doctors and families, but denied initially by administration with aggressive suppression of medical experts, then subsequent total disgrace. The latest current example in Australia is of inappropriate gynaecological surgery in Melbourne notified to administration but ignored until a media inquiry. Decision making by non-expert!

Construction of the hospital began in late May of 1934, with completion expected by December of that year. By August construction was well-advanced and the contractor and his workers were praised on their achievement despite the many difficulties under which they laboured. The writer went on to suggest that: "No doubt both Doctor and Sister will be pleased when they are able to occupy their quarters after having to put up with the present unsuitable arrangements".

The hospital's initial operations were led by a small team, including Dr. Clyde Fenton, a pioneering flying doctor known for his aerial medical evacuations in the region, a true Territorian, and Sister Olive O'Keefe, a nurse who later served in key roles such as matron at other Northern Territory facilities.

When completed and equipped, time allowed being six months from signing of contract, Katherine would be in possession of one of the best hospitals "North of 20" for a town of its size.
10 Northern Standard 9/1/1934

It is understood that Contractor V.W. Doyle is a tenderer for the Katherine Hospital construction, tenders for which closed on Monday last.
11 Northern Standard 23/2/1934

Up to the time of going to press, nothing definite is known as to who submitted the successful tender for the erection of the Katherine Hospital buildings and Medical Officers' residence at the river township.
12 Northern Standard 16/3/1934

Nursing Sister Green of the Katherine Hospital in the Northern Territory Medical Service was married to Mr. J.



Sister Olive O'Keefe
(Keefie)

Although the hospital was ready for occupation by Christmas the Chief Medical Officer, Dr C.E. Cook would not allow hospital staff to occupy their premises until the new year of 1935. Despite a curt telegram from the resident doctor, Dr Clyde Fenton asking for a reason, none was forthcoming from Dr Cook. More obstructive administration!

The nursing staff slept on the verandah, shared with spiders and ubiquitous disease carrying mosquitos, perhaps with snakes, an arrangement deemed suitable by Dr Cook regardless of the weather. Katherine with a highest recorded temperature of 45.6 C and lowest of 3.5 C!

On 11th January 1935 the essential and important clinical work had commenced, the hospital was occupied by staff and patients, though no official symbolic bureaucratic opening date was given.

The large central ward was multifunctional being used for staff dining, record keeping, medicine storage and surgical operations if required. The doctor was more fortunate than the sister, being provided with a house of similar design to the hospital, while huts were built to house Aboriginal patients.

Doctor Weston the new. Medical officer for the North Australian Medical Service who had the misfortune to break an axle of his car at the Thirty Four Mile the

B. Selman in the hospital. The bride was given away by Dr. C. E. Cook and Dr. C. C. Fenton was best man. After the ceremony, the numerous guests attended a reception at the Sportsman's Arms' Hotel.
13 Northern Standard 6/11/1934

previous week, was sent to the Katherine by train to assist in an operation there.
14 Northern Standard 29/1/1935

As the first resident doctor at the new Katherine Hospital, the impetuous Dr Clyde Fenton achieved great notoriety for his daring and often heroic aeronautical exploits. He founded the Aerial Medical Service, which brought emergency medical treatment to the widely scattered population of the Territory, and which still functions successfully today. Fenton saw the aeroplane as the only answer to providing emergency aid over the vast distances of the Northern Territory.

With great determination Fenton ultimately managed to borrow the funds to purchase a second-hand Gipsy Moth for five hundred pounds. Dr Fenton requested a lighting plant for Katherine Hospital to enable him to perform operations at night. At this time kerosene lamps were used and the staff had to deal with the constant frustration of insects wrecking the mantles. However, it was not until July 1937 that two electricians arrived to wire the hospital. Unfortunately, their contract specified the hospital only and did not include the doctor's house, operating theatre, or mortuary. Further heated requests from Dr Fenton ensured that by November 1937 all of Katherine hospital had electricity.
15 Northern Standard 11/12/1935

Devotion to duty was carried to remarkable extremes by Sister Olive O'Keefe when she married in 1938.

Naturally she and her new husband, John, wanted to have a few days alone before resuming her duties, but as one half of the two sister team, she was reluctant to leave the other sister alone to cope with whatever emergencies might arise. To Olive the solution was simple, she and her new husband would spend their honeymoon weekend camping and fishing by the river at the back of the Hospital. Luckily, the weekend proved to be an uneventful one at the Hospital and the newlyweds were left undisturbed.

The Rev John Flynn is one of the outstanding legends of this story. Ordained as a Minister of the Presbyterian Church in 1911, he established spiritual and medical services for the Australian outback, the flying doctor, his 'mantle of safety.

16 Stride P. Birdsville Hospital Nursing Staff 1923-1951 *WJPMR*, 2025, 11(4), 54-69

In 1917, John Flynn established a small hospital at Maranboy, seventy kilometres East of Katherine, part of the Australian Inland Mission group of hospitals

In 1931, Dr. Cecil Cook, Chief Medical Officer, decided to replace the existing Australian Inland Mission (AIM) Hospital at Maranboy with a new hospital in Katherine where there was a larger population, a solid river system, and a doctor already in the area.

Dinmore Kilns, Queensland made and sent a mortuary slab to the Katherine Hospital

It was the largest single piece of white, glazed fire-clay made in the southern hemisphere measuring one hundred and eighty three centimetres in length, sixty one centimetres in width, and weighing two hundred and fifty four kilograms.

17 Northern Standard 2/4/1935

The Katherine Hospital requested tenders for the supply, delivery and stacking at the Government Hospital at Katherine of fifteen cords of firewood 18 Northern Standard 20/12/1935

A part Indigenous lady was employed as cook and laundress at the Katherine Hospital seven full days per week for £2/0/0 per week, with board and lodging, Her husband, with whom she had a child, was a returned soldier, with four years' active service in France, Like many others, this man, who had given of his best for his country, found himself out of work, and was compelled to seek relief work to support himself and his dependants. He was given one and a half days work per week, for which he was paid 25/-. He kept his chin up and managed to make ends meet prior to his wife's employment.

The Standard comments that the government machinations are hard to understand!

19 Northern Standard 6/3/1936

Mr. H. J. Williams, of Pine Creek, was the successful tenderer for the erection of buildings at within

the Katherine Hospital grounds to be used as quarters for the nursing staff of that institution. It was understood that the contract price was £637.

20 Northern Standard 24/3/1936

A Miss Roden was appointed to the Katherine Hospital having served some time as a probationer at the Darwin Hospital. Four months later she resigned that position. The paper initially stated that she was nursing sister in charge of the Katherine Hospital but corrected this error four days later stating that the hospital was under the control of Sister Wunch, Miss Roden being a probationer at the hospital.

21 Northern Standard 10/7/1936 22Northern Standard 6/11/1936 23 Northern Standard 10/11/1936

L. H. A. Giles, the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory declared the said buildings and premises known as the Katherine Hospital to be suitable for a Government Hospital, a fact probably apparent for a year to the staff and patients without an administrators statement!

24 Northern Standard 24/12/1936

Mr. Len Scotty and Mrs. Dowling of Pine Creek, and Mr. T. O'Shea of Katherine kindly provided Christmas gifts for the inpatients of Katherine Hospital, a tradition across the hospitals of Northern Territory.

25 Northern Standard 31/12/1936

Doctor C. C. Fenton found William Davidson illegally on the premises of the Katherine Hospital in the quarters for the part indigenous staff. Davidson was prosecuted at the Police Court. Katherine where he was found not guilty on a point of law and Fenton was obliged to pay his costs.

Fenton then flew to Ross Smith Airport in Sydney conveying Captain Newmarsh, of Manbulloo Station, to town and flew out early next morning to return to Katherine.

26 Northern Standard 11/5/1937

Installation of the new electric light plant at the Katherine Hospital was about to commence with the arrival of. Mr. D. D. Smith, the resident engineer from Alice Springs, accompanied by Mr. Les Poole, the electrician.

27Northern Standard 23/7/1937

Peter, a Greek carpenter employed by the Works Department, arrived in Katherine to erect a small angle iron building to house the electric lighting plant at the Katherine Hospital.

28 Northern Standard 28/8/1937

Miss Maggie Smith, a former member of the domestic staff of the Katherine Hospital, married a Mr. D. Wilson at the Methodist Church.

29 Northern Standard 26/4/1938

Dr. Fenton, Sisters Harvey and Morrison, Mr. H. Shadforth, of Auvergne station, who was a convalescent patient at the Katherine Hospital and numerous others attended the wedding of Edna Eileen Barton and D'Arcy Ian Goddard at the Manbulloo homestead.
30 Northern Standard 12/7/1938

Another example of administrative incompetence and failure to assist experts is the Quilty case. When bringing Rod Quilty, a sick stockman, into Darwin, Dr. C. C. Fenton, the Northern Territory's flying medico, had to land at Katherine aerodrome in the dark. This was because Katherine lacked any radio equipment and he was unable to advise the officials to light the ground for him.

On board his plane were Miss Ormond, a Darwin Hospital sister, and the patient, and as his fuel supply was low he had no alternative but to risk a landing. Had Katherine been equipped with wireless this risk would have been obviated. It is his base, but it is not provided, with wireless communication. Had he a radio at his base he could notify his expected time of arrival with a patient and advise what preparations would be necessary at the hospital. Also messages for attention could be received direct from Katherine. This would often save several hours and might mean the difference between life and death.

When Quilty was brought in, Dr. Fenton said a delay of 24 hours would have been fatal. By its apparent apathy towards the flying doctor service the Government is greatly hampering the doctor in his

world. Messages have to reach him via Darwin, from where they are telegraphed during the day. At night and at the week-end they have to be phoned to Pine Creek Hospital and from there to Katherine Hospital. Delays in raising both hospitals are frequent, and communication is not clear. Often hours elapse between the time the message is received in Darwin and before it reaches Dr. Fenton at Katherine.

An illustration of what often happens is given in the case of, shall we say, Tommy, Jones. Tommy is employed on an eastern station. He is thrown from a horse and seriously injured. A call is sent out for the flying doctor. First it is flashed across to Cloncurry. From there to Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Darwin and to Katherine. But the particulars contained in the message are too inadequate. The doctor has to wire back asking for more explicit details and await a reply before he can set out on his flight. The time lost might often prove fatal, whereas if Katherine were provided with a tele-radio set the station could have communicated directly with the doctor.

It is apparent the flying doctors of the north are given extraordinarily little encouragement in their work. Eight months ago radio equipment for Katherine Hospital was ordered and the masts erected. When the equipment reached Darwin the Administration is alleged to have prohibited its installation. If this is true, then much harm has been done.

31 Northern Standard 7/3/1939



Dr Fenton

1 Deaths

There were nineteen deaths in the hospital or shortly prior to proposed admission. Five were flown to Katherine by Fenton. Three died of trauma, one of nephritis, two of poisoning, and thirteen of unspecified causes.

1 Trauma

Leonard Killingback died following a boxing fight with Oscar Mears in the Katherine Hall. The victim fell more than once striking his head. He lapsed into unconsciousness shortly after the fight and was taken to hospital by Dr Kirkland where he died. Kirkland's postmortem examination revealed a fractured skull and

an intracranial haemorrhage with raised intracranial pressure. Coroner's inquest confirmed death by misfortune.

Trephination or removing portions of the skull has a history dating back over two millennia, though burr holes for extracerebral haemorrhage were introduced in the late 20th century. Sir William Osler's medical text of 1893 mentions surgery for extra cranial haemorrhage and perhaps this should have been attempted.

32 William Osler *The Principles and Practice of Medicine* 1893 D. Appleton New York
33 Northern Territory Times 19/1/1932

A young indigenous boy died in the Katherine Hospital following an attack by a bull which had been wounded by a previous shot, at Dunmara, the property of Mrs. Noel Healey. He suffered fatal injuries when the bull tossed him in the air. Dr Fenton flew to the property, shot the bull, and observed the boy all night, then flew him to the Katherine Hospital next morning where he passed away some hours later.

34 Northern Standard 1/11/1935

A boy named George suffered a severe head injury at the hands of Victor, a young full-blooded aborigine becoming unconscious with a fractured skull. Dr. C. C. Fenton flew to Maranboy to collect George and conveyed him to Katherine Hospital. George was unconscious and remained in that state until he died. Fenton appeared as an expert witness at the trial of Victor charged with murder. Emily Helen Chambers, sister, of Katherine Hospital, also appeared and said the boy George was brought in by Dr. Fenton and died four days later.

The jury gave a verdict of guilty of manslaughter, with a strong recommendation for mercy.

Victor was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment with hard labour.

35 Northern Standard 14/4/1939

2 Renal Disease and poison

Edward Joseph Lawton, a stockman aged sixty four, died at the Katherine hospital from nephritis. Pathology then would have detected urinary protein and raised blood urea though not clarified the cause. Lawton was from Taroom in Queensland so may well have suffered from lead toxicity, a widespread problem in Queensland at the time.

36 Northern Standard 30/4/1935 36 B.T. Emmerson, P.J. Stride, G. Williams. The clinical differentiation of primary gout from primary renal disease in patients with both gout and renal disease. *Adv Exp Med Biol* 1980:122A:9-13.

Paddy Bennett, aged about sixty-five, a well-known Northern Territory bushman and mail carrier died near Katherine with symptoms indicating poisoning. A

companion, Monte Sullivan, aged forty-seven years, was in a serious condition in Katherine Hospital.

While travelling to Pine Creek from Katherine on Thursday the two men carried a bag containing a bottle of corrosive sublimate tablets. With the shaking of the bag the bottle broke and the tablets became pulverised in the bag. The men emptied the bag but later put a carton of dried peaches in it. The fruit was also shaken loose in the bag. Next morning they cut the peaches with knives used for putting strychnine into dingo baits! Shortly after eating the peaches Bennett died and Sullivan became violently ill. He, incredibly, galloped the eleven miles to Katherine on his horse and was admitted to hospital in a serious condition.

Both strychnine and corrosive sublimate are highly poisonous, but the result of the post mortem on Bennett was not yet known. Bennett was one of the best known characters in the Territory. Besides various experiences as a bushman for years he had carried the mail from Katherine to inland stations in the wet season. Although the tracks were made impassable for transport by the rains, and the creeks and rivers flooded, he never failed to get through with his packhorses. It was his boast that no flooded river ever stopped him.

Sullivan was a member of a family of nineteen from Queensland.

An Indigenous gentleman, Charlie, was another victim of this poisoning. He had been working around their camp and the bottle of strychnine hanging from a tree before his body was found. Contamination of his food was again suspected. Sullivan was still in hospital after eighteen days.

37 Northern Standard 20/12/1938 38 The Argus Melbourne 7/1/1939

George Gottschalk, an overlander, was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with suspected poisoning. He died the following day and the contents of his stomach were sent to the Darwin Health Laboratory for analysis. The results were not subsequently published.

The Police Department at Darwin received a telegram on Saturday signed "Ada Riley," asking that the post mortem on Gottschalk's body be held over until the arrival of a doctor from Melbourne. It is understood a woman was accompanying Gottschalk on his over land journey.

39 Northern Standard 18/8/1939

3 Idiopathic deaths

There were thirteen other published deaths with no given diagnosis. Twelve were male and one female. Stated ages of five of them were thirty, thirty six, sixty eight, sixty nine and seventy one at a time when sixty three was the average life expectancy. Three were acute conditions and two were in chronic ill health.

Mr. William Neptune Abbott, an old age pensioner of Pine Creek, died at the Katherine Hospital. He had been a blacksmith and for a few months in 1921 relieved at the Locomotive Shops in Darwin. His diagnosis was not stated but coal workers' pneumoconiosis or black lung disease would be possible.

40 Northern Standard 17/5/1932

Mrs. Margaret Hart of Lewin Springs station died after an unspecified illness extending over a number of years, at the Katherine Hospital. She was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1861, and came to Australia in the sailing vessel "Sir William Wallace," landing at Townsville, Queensland, in December 1881. Amongst other businesses, she and her husband Matthew Hart ran the Royal Hotel at Borrooloola for a decade.

41 Northern Standard 22/7/1932 42 Northern Standard 26/7/1932

Mr. Joseph Evans died at Maude Creek before visiting Doctor McCann before he was able to arrange his admission to the Katherine Hospital. He had been unwell for some time of an unspecified illness. He was born in England and had been in the army prior to migration. Subsequently he worked as a watchmaker, peanut farmer and carpenter 43 Northern Standard 16/5/1933

Two men died of unspecified diseases in the Katherine Hospital, William Clay, a half indigenous man on October 8th, and William Manchee of Moree, NSW, on October 9th.

44 Northern Standard 13/10/1933

Mr. Norman Watkins died suddenly in the Katherine Hospital at the early age of thirty years of an unspecified illness. Although unwell for a while, he had not bothered to seek medical advice on the grounds of his youthful age. When he finally consulted a doctor and was admitted to hospital where everything possible was done for him, he was beyond human aid and passed away the following day.

45 Northern Standard 16/10/1934

John Wilson, a thirty-six year old native of Ballarat, died at the Katherine Hospital. He was admitted from Maranboy but no diagnosis was given.

46 Northern Standard 23/10/1934

A Mr. George Stevens was transferred to the Katherine Hospital in unspecified low state of health, but he failed to respond to treatment and died a few days later in the hospital. Mr. Stevens had been in poor health for a long time and recently spent some time in the Katherine Hospital. After being treated he returned to his home at Pine Creek, but he relapsed.

Stevens was one of the oldest and best known members of the pastoral industry in the Northern Territory. He was for many years in business as a butcher in Pine Creek and had pastoral interests outside the town. He was

always public minded and took a prominent and often leading part in the town's activities.

47 Northern Standard 26/1/1937 48 Northern Standard 2/2/1937.

Joseph Webb, aged about 68, of Borrooloola, died in the Katherine Hospital. The deceased was brought in by Dr. Fenton in his plane last week seriously ill though his condition was unspecified.

49 Northern Standard 5/2/1937

Mr. G. Stockdale, a 69 year old former native of South Australia, died in the Katherine Hospital. Again, no diagnosis was given.

50 Northern Standard 2/3/1937

Mr. Jas. Parry reached the Adelaide River at 6 p.m. and died at 1 p.m. the following day in great pain. No diagnosis was stated and he received no medical attention. However Dr Fenton was less than an hour's flight away, but apparently, inexplicably, unable to undertake the journey without permission from Darwin. An extraordinary concept of decision by non-expert possibly costing a life and ensuring that the poor man died in severe pain when he could at least have had some morphine!

51 Northern Standard 28/5/1937

Despite a desperate dash by Dr. C. G. Fenton, the flying doctor, to save the lives of three people at McArthur River Station, about forty miles from Borrooloola, during the weekend, one of them, Thomas D'Archy, manager of McArthur River Station died.

D'Archy suddenly became unwell. His housekeeper, Sister Gwenellion Black, a professional nurse, attended him. Then she, too, suddenly contracted the illness. A message for help was sent by a black boy to Borrooloola police station. The Const. E. J. Heathcock, officer in charge, with his wife, who is a trained nurse, left for McArthur River Station immediately. Mrs. Heathcock nursed the patients until suddenly she also became ill.

An urgent call for the flying doctor's services was flashed across to Katherine by pedal radio. Fenton immediately set out for the station and on Saturday last returned to Katherine with the two female patients. It was thought they were suffering from a new form of fever.

Dr. Catatano, an officer of the N. T. Medical Service, formerly stationed at Tennant Creek, who was passing through Katherine on Sunday by Guinea Airways plane, enroute for Darwin, agreed to remain at Katherine while Dr. Fenton flew to Darwin for Dr. Cook, the Chief Medical Officer, who is a recognised authority on tropical diseases. On arriving back at Katherine Dr. Fenton found that Mr. D'Archy had died. A grim fight was now taking place to save the lives of Sister Black and Mrs. Heathcock.

Dr. Cook returned with Dr. Fenton in the latter's plane yesterday evening. The result of preliminary investigations suggest that Sister Black and Mrs. Heathcock were suffering from food poisoning. Mr. D'Archy's death was caused by pneumonia as a result of physical weakness following food poisoning. The occurrence of a severe contagious disease raises the possibility of typhoid, though this was more common in areas without abundant fresh water.

Tests have been taken and the report of the Commonwealth Health Laboratory is expected to discount any suggestion of a mysterious or new disease. 52 Northern Standard 25/1/1938 53 Stride P. Kalgoorlie Hospital, Western Australia 1895-1897, the First Five Months of Hospital Admissions, and Typhoid in the Gold Fields. J Environ Soc Sci. 2015;2(2): 116.

On Sunday Dr. Fenton brought an indigenous male by plane from Pine Creek to Katherine for treatment of an unspecified condition but the man died. 54 Northern Standard 17/5/1938

Admissions

There were fifty two published other admissions, thirty eight males and fourteen females. No diagnosis was stated in eighteen cases.

Trauma – Various forms of trauma in men were the largest distinct group. Ten men were injured in fights, one sustaining a fractured wrist, four of them were wounded by spears, one of whom was also found to have leprosy. Three men were injured in riding accidents, one was bitten by a dog and two, one male, one female were bitten by snakes. One man was injured in a railway crash, one had a fractured arm, one had an eye injury and one had an unspecified injury.

Obstetrics – four women gave birth uneventfully

Surgery – there were two operations, one for appendicitis and one for an eye condition

Infections – five patients had infections, one diphtheria, one rheumatic fever, one with a fever and two with unspecified infections.

Medical conditions – diagnostic clarity is lacking in the published cases. They were described as five being chronic, two being sick, one being serious and one recovering. Two had paralysis, one required transfer to Darwin and one was a miner perhaps with pulmonary disease.

Mr. G. Fordham who was recently discharged from the Katherine Hospital, after an attack of fever, was one of those who did suffer a relapse requiring admission to the Victoria River Depot Hospital. 55 Northern Territory Times 14/7/1931

Mr. W. McGregor was admitted to the Katherine Hospital suffering from injuries received when his horse bolting with him. 56 Northern Standard 14/7/1931

Mr Chardon was admitted to the Katherine hospital though his diagnosis was not stated. 57 Northern Territory Times 31/12/1931

Mrs Booth of Maryfield Station gave birth to a daughter in the Katherine hospital and both were progressing well. 58 Northern Territory Times 22/3/1932

Mr. Chardon who had been an inmate of the Katherine Hospital for some months past and in indifferent health for some years with an unspecified condition was admitted to the Darwin Hospital from the train travelling from Katherine. 59 Northern Standard 22/3/1932

Mr. C. E. Gaunt, of Pine Creek, a valued contributor, underwent an operation in the Katherine Hospital, for the removal of an eye growth, perhaps a pterygium. A good result was to be hoped for as the other has extremely poor sight owing to a cataract. 60 Northern Standard 22/3/1932

A son was born to Mrs and Mr Robert Wood, at the Katherine Hospital. 61 Northern Standard 6/5/1932

Mr. George Hunter was reported to be in poor health at the Katherine Hospital. His condition was unspecified. He had been the foreman of the overland telegraph line party for many years. 62 Northern Standard 28/6/1932 63 Northern Standard 13/9/1932

Mrs. Edward was admitted to the Katherine Hotel with a deep painful dog bite on her leg and was reported to be progressing well.

Mrs. Cox was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with an unspecified but serious condition and was reported to be recovering well. She was discharged from the Katherine Hospital a week later to return to her home in Pine. Creek by train 64 Northern Standard 17/1/1933 65 Northern Standard 24/1/1933

A railway employee was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with injuries suffered in a brawl at Pine Creek with other employees. 66 Northern Standard 3/3/1933 Dr. Cook responded to a question about the reason for transferring a man to Darwin Hospital, he had a fractured limb and it was thought the Xray machine would assist in the optimum setting of the limb. Cook added that Katherine Hospital was more for fever and such like cases. 67 Northern Standard 29/8/1933

A daughter was born to Mr. and Mrs. Kearnan, (nee Miss J. O'Shea,) at the Katherine Hospital.
68 Northern Standard 17/11/1933

Doctor G. E. Cook from the Katherine arrived by train in Darwin accompanied by a suspected leper from Mataranka
69 Northern Standard 9/1/1934

Mr Ivans, a lay missionary was brought into Katherine by the missionaries, Messrs. Port and Taylor. He was admitted to the Katherine hospital with a serious but unspecified illness.

E. J Holloway, a Herald correspondent, travelled to Katherine meeting both the hospital nurse and Dr. Fenton, the flying doctor, both of whom were wonderfully kind and attentive. He considered a bush nurse and a flying doctor in the outback really are a blessing!
70 Northern Standard 26/6/1934

Mr. W. F. Murphy of the Cosmopolitan battery, and a well-known mining identity, had been discharged from the Katherine Hospital, to convalesce at Pine Creek
71 Northern Standard 10/7/1934

Mrs. L. M. Brumby thanked Sister Green and Dr. Fenton for professional attention during her recent unspecified illness.
72 Northern Standard 4/9/1934

Mr. Frank Taflin, a railway mechanic, was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with a broken ankle, sustained in an accident occurring in a quad crash on the railway. He was on his way on the railhead to repair departmental telephones.
73 Northern Standard 6/11/1934

An Indigenous gentleman, Kalal was admitted to the Katherine Hospital following a brawl in which he suffered some injuries. Myrtle Elizabeth Wunsch, nursing sister at the Katherine Hospital stated at a subsequent trial, that she remembered Kalal was brought to the Hospital at midnight on 23rd December. He had three lacerated wounds on the head, she stitched one but did not think it was necessary to stitch the other two.

His general condition was poor. He appeared to be unconscious. He was sick and irritable all through the night due to the wounds. She never heard him speak during the fortnight he was in hospital. Evidently one of the blows inflicted upon his head had affected a nerve centre, as Kalal was quite unable to speak. Subsequently he was transferred for medical treatment at the Darwin Hospital

Dr. Clyde Cornwall Fenton gave evidence at the Criminal Sessions of the Supreme Court of having attended an indigenous man, Kalal who was injured in a

fight with three other indigenous men. Kalal had two lacerated wounds on his scalp, one on each side of the top of the head. The skin had broken through almost to the bone. His general condition was very weak. He was unable to speak and from Fenton's examination of him and from what the Sister told him, the doctor formed the conclusion that he suffered a fractured skull.

There was a marked improvement over a week in Kalal's condition, but he remained aphasic which Fenton thought may be permanent hence he was transferred to Darwin.

Three Indigenous men were subsequently charged at the Criminal Sessions of the Supreme Court with the attempted murder, of Kalal, but witness accounts indicated that Kalal initiated the fracas and it was suggested that the case should be dismissed. The three defendants were found not guilty 74 Northern Standard 11/1/1935 75 Northern Standard 12/4/1935 Mr. Noel Healey has been discharged from the Katherine hospital. No diagnosis was published.
76 Northern Standard 29/1/1935

Doctor Fenton and Nursing Sister Eileen Styles flew his two-seater Medical Service plane from Katherine to McArthur Station, forty miles from Borroloola to attend the wife of the station manager. On arrival there it was found necessary to bring the patient back to the Katherine Hospital. This being completed the Doctor then flew back to bring in Miss Styles. It is stated that the patient was responding very well.
77 Northern Standard 26/3/1935

An indigenous man named Noble was speared allegedly by three other aboriginals named Peter, Snider, and Long Jack. When Constable Lang found Noble he was in a critical condition as a result of the multiple spear wounds. Lang conveyed him to the Wimmera bush hospital of the Australian Inland Mission where the wireless was used to communicate with Dr. G.C. Fenton, flying doctor stationed at Katherine, who flew the Magic Carpet plane to the Wimmera hospital on Sunday and conveyed Noble next day to the Katherine Hospital for treatment.

He was suspected of also having leprosy, hence was transferred in the leper suspect truck from the plane to an isolation unit.
78 Northern Standard 10/5/1935 79 Northern Standard 28/5/1935

Mr. Jack Morck, the Mataranka Roper River mail contractor, was discharged from the Katherine Hospital, following admission for a while. Jack was looking old and feeble, and the Standard stated, perhaps optimistically, that the many friends of this bush battler would wish him a speedy return to robust health.

Mr. Edward Scott, a miner at Maranboy, was admitted to the Katherine Hospital for treatment of an unspecified condition.

80 Northern Standard 18/6/1935

Mr. "Snip" Sharp, the well-known ganger, was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with a severe episode of rheumatic fever where he was reported to be improving. Mr. Harry Gribbon, butcher, of Pine Creek, was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with an unspecified condition and was expected to be discharged imminently. Mr. Norman Stacy, who had been in the Katherine hospital for some weeks was not responding to treatment and was transferred to Darwin Hospital for further treatment.

81 Northern Standard 24/12/1935

Les Campbell, a former Darwin barber, was admitted to the Katherine hospital suffering from leg injuries. Arthur Farmer, previously well-known in Darwin, and now of Mataranka, was seen in Katherine Hospital seeking medical attention for an unspecified condition.

82 Northern Standard 7/1/1936

The Flying Doctor's plane suffered an accident to the undercarriage, when making a night landing, at Manbulloo Station after a hurried visit to the Katherine Hospital from Manbulloo to attend to an accident case.

83 Northern Standard 28/1/1936

Mr. Tom Russell, an old prospector, who has been on the Maude Creek field for some time past, was admitted to the Katherine hospital with a rather nasty leg injury.

84 Northern Standard 17/3/1936

Billy Ramirez was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with a broken wrist requiring setting. It was sustained when cranking the engine of a utility truck but it backfired.

85 Northern Standard 24/3/1936

Mr. Tom Cole after a spell in the Katherine hospital with an injured leg, was transferred by train to the Darwin Hospital.

86 Northern Standard 16/6/1936

An Indigenous lady was admitted to the Katherine Hospital with a few injuries from a spear sustained in a dispute at Maranboy with an indigenous male when she refused to hand over her supply of tobacco.

87 Northern Standard 24/11/1936

In 1937 Fenton obtained a larger type of aircraft, the DH Fox Moth. This meant that a stretcher could now be carried together with a sister to attend to the patient during the flight. But the weight of the aircraft was still an important consideration particularly during take-off and Fenton, being no respecter of personal feelings would callously request the "skinny" sister stationed at

Katherine in preference to the other sister, who had a fuller figure.

Mr. Johnny O'Shea was transported to the Katherine Hospital for an unspecified condition by Doctor Fenton and after treatment for several weeks responded and was discharged home in good health again.

88 Northern Standard 20/4/1937

The Darwin Supreme Court sittings, which were to have been held in May were postponed as Judge Wells was an inmate of Katherine Hospital suffering from diphtheria. The mortality at this time was around 8% and vaccines had been available for a decade. There is concern today in the era of anti-science and anti-vaccines that diphtheria may become a more frequent optional disease!

89 Northern Standard 21/5/1937

Mrs. Fisher, the popular licensee of the Mataranka Hotel, was again a patient in the Katherine Hospital with an unspecified disease.

The aboriginal tracker, George, was taken to the Katherine Hospital by Dr. Fenton, the flying doctor, having been speared through the shoulder, allegedly by Humbert Tommy, when George went to the assistance of Constable Fitzgerald during an altercation. Initially, George had been receiving medical attention at the A.I.M. Hospital at Victoria River[Downs until he suddenly deteriorated. Arrangements were immediately made for Dr. Fenton to fly out to Victoria River Downs, about 200 miles away, to remove George to Katherine where the victim was reported to be making satisfactory progress.

Humbert Tommy was charged in the Darwin Police Court with the attempted murder of Tracker George in Gordon. Evidence for the prosecution was given by Const. Fitzgerald, Tracker George, and Dr. Fenton. Dr Fenton stated that Tracker George had a superficial back injury from a shovel-nosed spear with entry and exit lesions. The higher wound was five inches in length and vertical in direction. The lower wound was horizontal and three inches long. Dr Fenton conveyed him to hospital where he had been an inpatient for two months.

The State Magistrate said he was satisfied a prima facie case had been established and Tommy was committed to stand his trial at the next sittings of the N.T. Supreme Court. 90 Northern Standard 20/8/1937 91 Northern Standard 3/12/1937 Miss Helen Hooley was conveyed to the Katherine Hospital by the flying doctor having broken her arm on a remote property two weeks previously. A measure of the difficulties obtaining medical care in the bush and the stoicism of the 'bushies'. She was still suffering considerable pain and could not use her arm.

Despite the gruelling experience which he recently underwent Dr. Fenton flew his own plane from Newcastle Waters to Katherine accompanied from Birdum to Katherine by Flight.-Lt. Hely in the Rapide. At present Dr. Cook is stationed at Katherine. 92 Northern Standard 1/10/1937

Despite a desperate dash by Dr. C. G. Fenton, the flying doctor, to save the lives of three people at McArthur River Station, about forty miles from Borrooloola, during the weekend, one of them has died. The full facts were not known, but from those available it appears that during the week Thomas D'Archy, manager of McArthur River Station, suddenly took ill. His housekeeper, Sister Gwenellion Black, professional nurse, attended him. Then she, too, suddenly contracted the illness. A message for help was sent by a black boy to Borrooloola police station. The Const. E. J. Heathcock, officer in charge,, with his wife, who is a trained nurse, left for McArthur River Station immediately. Mrs. Heathcock nursed the patients until suddenly she also became ill.

An urgent call for the flying doctor's services was flashed across to Katherine by pedal radio. He immediately set out for the station and on Saturday last returned to Katherine with the patients. It was thought they were suffering from a new form of fever.

Dr. Catatano, an officer of the N. T. Medical Service, formerly stationed at Tennant Creek, who was passing through Katherine on Sunday by Guinea Airways plane, enroute for Darwin, agreed to remain at Katherine while Dr. Fenton flew to Darwin for Dr. Cook, the Chief Medical Officer, who is a recognised authority on tropical diseases. On arriving back at Katherine Dr. Fenton found that Mr. D'Archy had died. A grim fight is now taking place to save the lives of Sister Black and Mrs. Heathcock.

Dr. Cook returned with Dr. Fenton in the latter's plane yesterday evening. The result of preliminary investigations suggest that Sister Black and Mrs. Heathcock are suffering from food poisoning. Mr. D'Archy's death was caused by pneumonia as a result of physical weakness following food poisoning. Typhoid would again be possible as a severe contagious disease with significant mortality. 53 Stride P. Kalgoorlie Hospital, Western Australia 1895-1897, the First Five Months of Hospital Admissions, and Typhoid in the Gold Fields. J Environ Soc Sci, 2015;2(2): 116.

Tests have been taken and the report of the Commonwealth Health Laboratory is expected to discount any suggestion of a mysterious or new disease. 93 Northern Standard 25/1/1938

Two indigenous males with leprosy escaped from the isolation unit of the Katherine Hospital last week. One was captured at Mataranka, The other was found dead on the Mataranka-Maranboy road, eighteen miles from

Maranboy. Const. V. C. Hall, officer in charge of the Maranboy Police Station, was investigating an alleged murder. 94 Northern Standard 18/2/1938

Mr. J. Roden, bookkeeper of Victoria River Station, was conveyed to the Katherine Hospital by Dr. Fenton, the flying doctor, suffering from an unspecified form of paralysis.

Mr Leo Byrne, of Tipperary Station, was also conveyed to the Katherine Hospital by the flying doctor, having been bitten on the foot by a large snake. Byrne recovered uneventfully under strict observation.

Mr. Bob McLennan, of the Katherine, has returned by plane from the south, where he had been treated successfully an injured eye. The Standard does not state if the injury occurred south of the town or if the treatment was not available in Katherine. 95 Northern Standard 5/4/1938

The John Joseph Risby saga received extensive coverage in the Standard. Risby was a chronic invalid with cardiac failure, severe aortic regurgitation and possible pulmonary tuberculosis. While his condition was fairly severe he appeared stable on optimum therapy. He also had a most unpleasant personality offending staff and other patients with his continued complaining.

Fenton discharged Risby from Katherine Hospital because of his behaviour and traumatised nurses. Risby went to Darwin, was admitted to hospital and died there.

Two inquiries were held into his discharge and death possibly driven by some anti-medical sentiment. One criticised Fenton for not arranging accommodation though he was not a social worker and had appropriately passed responsibility to the police and the other deemed death inevitable 96 Northern Standard 11/1/1938 97 Northern Standard 29/3/1938 98 Northern Standard 12/4/1938 99 Northern Standard 1/7/1938

Mrs. P. Bynum travelled to Darwin by the delayed mixed train, having been in the Katherine Hospital for several weeks. Dr Fenton had conveyed her there from Oenpelli with an unspecified illness. 100 Northern Standard 3/5/1938

Mr. Ted Martin of the Bovril Estates was flown from the Victoria River Wimmera Nursing Home by Dr. Fenton to the Katherine Hospital with appendicitis. He had improved considerably since arrival though whether he had surgery is not stated. Appendicectomy is a relatively simple operation within the capacity of a first year house surgeon such as the author in the Middlesex Hospital in 1970!

Mr. Frank Earl was admitted to the Katherine Hospital for several weeks having been thrown from a horse

during a night of cattle watching when the cattle rushed his horse. He was pitched over a log into the top of a fallen tree, receiving serious head injuries, including a damaged right eye. Earl had progressed sufficiently well to enable him to be discharged.

101 Northern Standard 31/5/1938

Dr. Fenton, Sisters Harvey and Morrison, Mr. H. Shadforth, of Auvergne station, who was a convalescent patient at the Katherine Hospital and numerous others attended the wedding of Edna Eileen Barton and D'Arcy Ian Goddard at the Manbulloo homestead.

102 Northern Standard 12/7/1938

Dr. Fenton gave evidence before Mr. N. C. Bell, S.M., in the Police Court. Sergt. R R. Bridgeland prosecuted, accusing when Kaiser, an aboriginal of the Victoria River district, of unlawfully assaulting George Shaw, head stockman of the Montjinnie Station. Fenton came out and took Shaw to the Katherine Hospital where about three or four stitches were inserted into a superficial laceration of the chest.

An argument had broken out between Shaw and Kaiser that they were not watching some bullocks adequately. Shaw fired four shots from his pistol and Kaiser retaliated by throwing a boomerang striking Shaw's chest. Bell deemed Kaiser not guilty considering the provocation adequately excused him. Considering the weapons used, the pair were fortunate not to have sustained severe injuries!

103 Northern Standard 2/7/1938 104 Northern Standard 5/8/1938 105 Northern Standard 9/8/1938

Fenton flew Rod Quilty, a sick stockman into Katherine. He may have then flown onto Darwin though this is not clear. The diagnosis is not specified though Fenton thought a twenty four hour delay may have been fatal.

Communication and flight problems are noted above in the hospital section.

106 Northern Standard 7/3/1939

Dr. C. G Fenton told the story of a Northern Territory stockman's great fortitude. About a week after he had been injured when mustering cattle, William O'Connor was taken to hospital by the flying doctor. He had directed two part indigenous men to carry him to a plain known as "Fenton's Flat," near Tanumbirini. For several days he had lain there waiting for the flying doctor to arrive. He had sent an aboriginal boy to Nutwood Downs Station, thirty miles away, to have a message sent to Dr. Fenton at Katherine.

Dr. Fenton flew to Nutwood Downs and from there to the Flat, finding his way by means of landmarks which, he said, he could never forget. The flat derived its name after Dr. Fenton, who had made a forced landing on it eighteen months ago.

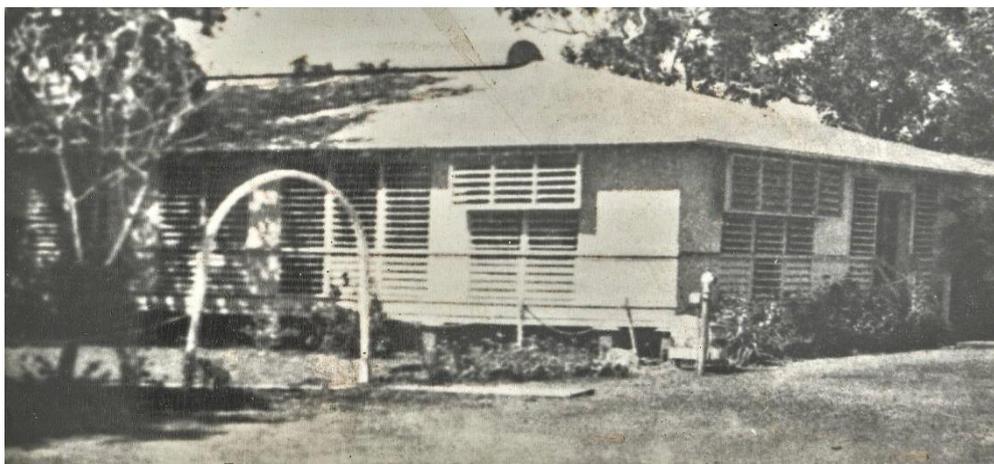
When Dr. Fenton arrived there he greeted O'Connor with the jocular remark: "You can't stay any longer on my flat without paying; rent." O'Connor retorted: "That cow you killed when you were forced down here was mine, and I want payment for it"

O'Connor, was taken by the doctor to Katherine Hospital. 107 Northern Standard 24/3/1939

Mr. and Mrs. Kandos, of Katherine Hospital staff, had a daughter at the Darwin Hospital, 108 Northern Standard 26/6/1939

Dr. J. L. Diggle, a distinguished surgeon from Melbourne, flew two thousand kms over a day and a half to reach Katherine Hospital to perform a critical life-saving operation. No further details were given of the patient or condition.

109 Northern Standard 18/8/1939



Katherine Hospital in 1954

CONCLUSIONS

The most unique feature about medicine in Katherine during the eight years prior to WW2 was the presence of a 'flying doctor'. Dr Clyde Fenton was not only a well-

qualified doctor, but also a brilliant pilot who flew at any time of day or night, in atrocious weather, to remote locations on dark short rough landing strips to convey

acutely sick patients to the best medical care available. Fenton will be the subject of another article.

Outback roads need to be experienced to have some idea of their difficulty. Some dirt roads have been recently graded and are excellent. Some resemble near vertical rockeries with intermittent creeks up to a meter deep. Recommendations are both to walk through to check the depth and not to enter because of salt water crocodiles! Rough roads even in a modern four wheel drive today may only permit a maximum speed of twenty kilometres per hour. Sometimes they are flooded and impassable. A flying doctor often makes a difference of life or death for acute illnesses.



Predictably the most frequent health issues were various forms of trauma in men. Women gave birth successfully thanks to their courage and the nursing staff. Details of patients suffering various forms of accidents are published. Diagnoses of patients suffering medical illnesses were rarely given, perhaps physician, patient and press preferred or accepted professional confidentiality, perhaps they were unknown to the doctors given the paucity of diagnostic modalities at the time in the remote Northern Territory.

The success of the medical and nursing staff in the indescribable, must be experienced outback in spite of frequent obstruction or lack of cooperation from administration is much to be admired.

Outback road!

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