



CLOSE TO HOME

Patients in regional NSW are enjoying better access to local, specialised healthcare provided by dedicated specialists. We spoke to three patients and their doctors about the benefits of this care.

By Stephanie Osfield

Liley Wykes, 84 grew up in Orange and in 1967, married husband Trevor, a farmer, in Dorigo.

After a few years on a dairy farm, the couple spent 17 years employed and living on the Yates Vegetable West Research Station, in Narromine, where they propagated, tended and pollinated plants to collect seeds. They also raised their two children, later moving to a 25-acre property nearby, where they continued to grow crops for Yates. Fast forward many years and Liley now a grandmother of two, lives with her husband in a retirement village near Dubbo Zoo, having moved to town for easier access to amenities. So when Liley discovered a lump behind her right ear in 2022, she was very grateful to be able to receive treatment and care closer to home.

A biopsy of the lump showed atypical cells. "The ENT doctor in Dubbo said I needed to see a Sydney ENT doctor specialising in that kind of surgery," Liley recalls. "The prospect of dealing with the travel, traffic, crowds, stress and

cost of accommodation was very off-putting. We're too old to drive that distance so we would have had to commute over eight hours via bus and train to get there. The wait for the Sydney appointment was at least five months and would have coincided with big events like Taylor Swift's concert and Mardi Gras, so hotels were all booked out." Liley was then referred to an ENT specialist in Newcastle, but the wait was six months. "Then, luckily, my Dubbo ENT doctor suddenly said, 'how would you like to see a new ENT specialist in Orange?'" Liley explains. "The new specialist had just come back to the country to set up practice. I was over the moon."

Two days later, Liley had an appointment with him. "He was so lovely, dedicated and inclusive of my family and good at explaining everything."

A few months later, he removed the lump in hospital. "Getting care closer to home made it so much easier to go for the pre and post-op visits at the hospital. The nursing staff were so lovely and with my

specialist I was in the best of hands. The hospital, which has been redone in recent years, has lovely gardens and views of the golf course, so it felt very calming," says Liley, who felt more relaxed knowing that when she was discharged the next day, it would only take two hours to get home by car.



Dr Sam Roberts, ENT Specialist

"It's a lovely commute past canola crops, wattles and eucalypt trees," she says. "Ten days after the surgery, I was very happy to learn that the lump was benign. I was so lucky to see an amazing specialist nearby. It meant I could receive top quality healthcare with far less stress and travel."

Dr Sam Roberts, Liley's ENT specialist, who has expertise in head and neck oncology, sees many patients who find the idea of commuting to Sydney for their healthcare intimidating, "especially if they have never been to a city bigger than Orange or Dubbo". Dr Roberts himself grew up near Walgett, then lived on a farm



Liley Wykes, Dubbo NSW. Amy Allen Photography

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between Armidale and Tamworth “In addition to appointments, rural patients treated in the city might have to go back and forth for tests and then stay nearby after surgery in case of complications,” he says. “But since COVID, it has become easier for specialists to live and practise in rural areas, increasing patient options. I operate at the Chris O’Brien Lifehouse in Sydney once a month. Recently, I did a 14-hour operation there and afterwards, I did all the follow-up care for that patient in Orange. Telehealth is of great benefit as it means I can practise in Orange but dial into online meetings, talk about a patient’s tumour and get pathology and scans looked at by expert radiologists and pathologists who specialise in neck and head health in the city.”

Three years ago, Clair Thompson, now 77, a registered nurse for 30 years, lost some hearing in her right ear. Then in January this year, she heard a loud squealing sound and her left ear suddenly lost all hearing. Tests confirmed she was now ‘profoundly deaf’. “My quality of life quickly deteriorated,” Clair recalls. “I went from being a bright, happy, person who was active socially, going out for coffee and playing cards regularly, to being mostly housebound. I didn’t feel comfortable or confident going for walks or driving very far from home. I could no longer talk on the phone – even to make an appointment. Though my wonderful group of friends were very supportive, the spontaneity of normal conversation was gone.”

Daunted by the prospect of driving five hours for an MRI scan in Newcastle, Clair didn’t have the test. “Then a Cochlear ear implant was recommended and I needed to be assessed at the closest clinic, three hours away in Sydney’s west. I didn’t want to bother anyone, so I paid a driver \$400 to take me to Sydney and back in one day.” Clinic staff explained that after the surgery

Clair would have to travel back twice monthly, then monthly. “It made me feel overwhelmed and think twice about having the surgery,” she confesses. But she was fortunate to find surgeon who could do the operation in Orange.

“It made the world of difference as I no longer had this huge commute and was able to have my supportive friends around. They picked up things for me, took me to appointments, did my washing and dropped in clean clothes. Having the pre-op and post-op care so close by was a huge plus for my psychological wellbeing.”

Earlier this year, after the implant was switched on in Newcastle, Clair was relieved that she could have it further tuned in Orange.

“I was so grateful for the technology and dedicated support of the staff but very relieved the rest of my care could be followed up near home. I can now hear birds singing, my cat purring and water falling on the leaves when I water my garden. My daughter recently said she had heard me laugh more in a week than I had all year and was pleased to ‘have her mother back’. It’s still early days, but I have had my first conversation on the phone which was very exciting. I have newfound energy and optimism and can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I cannot praise my specialist highly enough. I am so grateful for his incredible support and encouragement. The quality of care provided by him, my anaesthetist and all the nursing staff was exemplary.”



Dr Aydin Mohammadi, ENT Head and Neck Surgeon

For Dr Aydin Mohammadi, an Otorhinolaryngologist head and neck surgeon, “being able to restore Clair’s hearing has been an absolute privilege one of the most professionally and personally rewarding experiences of my career so far”.

Dr Mohammadi works in central west NSW in several regional hospitals including Bathurst, Forbes, and Orange, where his practice is based. “I trained in Newcastle and Sydney but my exposure to the kindness of people of Parkes NSW, where I grew up, along with my passion to fill gaps in rural and remote healthcare, drew me back to the country,” he says. “I hope that accessing specialist care closer to home helped Clair feel more empowered and less stressed.

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Working in a rural region, I feel a deep connection to my very grateful patient community and I more directly see results of their healthcare. I also live only five minutes away from work, so I enjoy better work-life balance.”

Joy Cochrane, 72, grew up in Barradine, married in 1968 and moved to Walgett where she worked as a nurse at the hospital. “Back then and when I was a child, if someone had a condition like cancer they usually went to the city for treatment, but healthcare has come a long way since then,” she observes.

In 2020, when Joy saw her surgeon after a hysterectomy, she was shocked to learn she had a totally unrelated form of cancer called follicle lymphoma. Initially, she travelled to Tamworth and Newcastle for specialist appointments and tests, which she found exhausting.

“So, it was a relief when I sought a second opinion with a haematologist in Dubbo, and the commute took three hours, not up to six hours,” Joy says. “I can’t speak highly enough of him. He is a wonderful, caring doctor, very warm and compassionate and so clear in how he explains things. I was also lucky to be able to have my three cycles of chemotherapy in Dubbo where there is a new PET machine, so I can get scans closer to home, too.”

Joy is currently undergoing chemo in Dubbo every three weeks. Three times she has had adverse reactions and had to be airlifted from Baradine to Dubbo which takes 50 minutes. “At those times, it is very good to see my specialist’s familiar face,” she says. “Having chemo closer to home is so less taxing for me and my family. My husband and twin sister come to every treatment, sitting by my side, chatting and keeping me company for the eight-hour infusion. When we leave, it’s a relief that the soothing drive home is only a couple of hours along lovely quieter roads seeing the trees and birds. I’m a big homebody



Dr Tom Gleeson with patient Joy Cochrane

I love being in our garden with our two dogs, cat, chooks and of course, my three kids and four grandkids when they visit. Accessing more local healthcare has made the world of difference to the wellbeing of myself and my family.”

Dr Tom Gleeson, a VMO haematologist who lives and practises in the region and has a special interest in multiple myeloma, agrees localised care has made a huge difference to Joy’s quality of life.

“Joy has been able to have all her consultations and chemotherapy in western NSW without ever having to travel to Sydney for cancer care.

“Her consultations are a mix of her coming to see me in Dubbo, me flying up to see her in my outreach clinic in Walgett and a little bit of telehealth, too.

“She has received all her chemo-immunotherapy here at the Western Cancer Centre Dubbo where I am

based. It is a spectacular rural cancer centre, which the people of Dubbo and western NSW are very proud of.”

For his work, Dr Gleeson covers thousands of kilometres each month by road and air. With support of the Western NSW Local Health District executive, he has doubled the number of outreach clinics to Mudgee and established the first outreach clinics to Coonabarabran, Walgett, Bourke and Cobar.

“These clinics allow patients in rural and remote areas to receive specialist blood cancer care closer to home, and in many cases ‘on country’, in a culturally safe manner by partnering with local Indigenous Elders and Aboriginal Health Workers,” says Dr Gleeson who is working to increase equity of access to specialist cancer care and outcomes for people in rural and remote areas. **dr.**

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