

RWAV acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we broadcast. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to elders past, present, and emerging. Welcome to the Talking Country Health Podcast, where we discuss everything to help health professionals navigate working in rural and regional Victoria.

I'm your host, Andrew Maher. This episode we'll be talking to Dr. Jennifer Collier, a general and heart failure cardiologist. Jennifer worked in Melbourne for the first 10 years of her career, but developed an increasing interest in regional and rural cardiovascular health. In 2019, she established connected cardiology to better support patients in regional Victoria by creating a network of clinicians providing rural outreach.

These have included cardiology outreach clinics at Shepparton, Cobram, and Foster and Echocardiography outreach at Numurkah, and a cardiology nurse practitioner clinic at Shepparton. Having relocated to Shepparton and in 2022, she continues to work on developing a sustainable model of cardiology outreach services to support heart health locally in the Goulburn Valley and surrounding areas.

Pleased to meet you, Jennifer. Thank you for joining us today. It's a pleasure, Andy.

Please tell us a little bit about your career and, where you live and work now. So I grew up in a, a fairly quiet town in, in Berwick at the time. It was very quiet back then, not so much now, so it's about, about 50 kilometers outside of Melbourne as you probably know. And I ended up studying there, but then later going to Melbourne and, and studying there, going to university there. Initially undertaking a couple of years of science and then transferring over to a medical degree. Because I was always very passionate about doing research and helping patients in the best way that I could.

So, then I just became really interested. I, I had a few placements overseas and got really interested in kind of health equity overall.

Where did you go overseas? I went to, uh, Samoa and South India for some elective placements. And so, yeah, had some really very different experiences from what we've see in Australia, no doubt.

And so that was very influential in my later career. So I came back to Australia and I ended up doing my physician training, so training to be a specialist and then undertaking my cardiology training then. Ended up becoming more and more interested in rural health and the impact that as a cardiologist we can make on heart health in, in regional Victoria and on a wider scale. So ended up doing more and more outreach from Melbourne initially. So driving up from Melbourne for a day or eventually a few days, and then eventually I. But was spending half my life in Shepparton. So I relocated about three years ago with my family and have been trying to move the services here forward and expand the workforce here to support heart health in the whole area.

Yeah. What inspired you to specialize in cardiology?

So I guess the things that were really inspiring was I did actually train with some fantastic heart failure cardiologists, and they were just really holistic in their approach in terms of both looking at the, the patient and trying to do sometimes quite complex diagnostic process, but just working out how to partner with patients and having that really great, um, relationship with them and doing the chronic disease management side, which can be quite a challenge.

And so I guess I like a challenge. So I ended up. Specialising in that heart failure area. But also I just love the fact that you have some very clear tests that often do tell you quite clear answers, but also the, the potential for some really amazing treatments that if they're initiated early, that you can really make a big impact and even, you know, improving people's quality of life or even preventing heart attacks, strokes, and potentially even in saving lives.

And so what inspired you to get out of the rat race and move to rural Victoria?

I guess that I was traveling for about eight years up and back. And so that was quite a big commitment. And as I was finding it harder and harder to come back to Melbourne and reconcile myself to the fact that I'd be leaving a rural area that was in such need and I wouldn't be back for a few weeks.

And I was finding that harder and harder and you know, I guess I just got used to the freedom and the lifestyle of being in regional Victoria and being able to get out on the road and. Driving past the fields and just having that really great sense of freedom and just, yeah, just enjoying that more, that connection to nature when you're in, in the regional areas versus metropolitan Melbourne where I spent many years. And also, yeah, just the, the potential just to make an impact to actually really move and drive some change and. Because I have quite a significant network in Melbourne to actually try to work out, taking that metro experience and then trying to work out how do you make that work in regional Victoria to give the best support possible for people's heart health.

And so at what point in all this did you start working with RWAV?

I actually heard about RWAV quite some years ago. First because I was initially starting to go down to Foster in Gippsland for an outreach service and I, I believe I was talking to a colleague who, mentioned that they had some funding support from the Rural Health Outreach Fund that Rural Workforce Agency provides. And so I made an application and I actually was successful in that application and that has. That was quite some years ago, but they've been certainly extremely supportive ever since.

Great. And which services have you used?

So predominantly the, the Rural Health Outreach Fund, but that's been across a number of services that we offer. So that supports some of my own cardiology clinic outreach services, but also some allied health services. So providing echocardiography, so ultrasound of the heart up to a town about 30 kilometers north of Shepparton at Numurkah, and also, um, supporting nurse practitioner to come up and actually provide a clinic in Shepparton as well.

And a couple of years ago you won the RWAV 2023 outstanding Contribution to Rural Outreach Provision Award. Big congratulations for that. How important do you think these awards are for health professionals and for the communities that they serve?

I guess that rural healthcare professionals, they work really, really hard, really hard. I mean, not that all healthcare professionals don't work hard, but there are some specific challenges in regional areas and I think that really putting that lens on the, the work that people are doing is really important, not just for the recognition that those teams get or individuals get, but also in highlighting the need in regional areas as well.

I think that's really, really important and putting that specific lens on. What work those people are doing can make a big impact in terms of just also promoting what great work people are doing and attracting other people to similarly engage in those types of services. I understand that PulsePoint Academy, which is an organisation that you've founded, sponsored that Rural Workforce Agency Victoria Conference.

Can you tell us a little bit about the Pulse Point Academy?

So PulsePoint Academy is an education platform that we funded. Essentially, it's really trying to bridge that gap between the potential for education that is available often in metropolitan areas, and bridging the gap between that and the opportunities that people in regional and remote areas actually have to that training. So the idea is that we would provide some support, both education, but also kind of developing a little bit more community around the chronic disease management of cardiac diseases across Australia. And also providing some on the ground support with some quality improvement activities as well to really try to help the healthcare professional workforce across the board to actually just support heart health more confidently in being able to communicate with their patients really effectively and positively as well around how to improve heart health.

Fantastic service. And you're also the founder and director of Connected Cardiology. What inspired you to establish this clinic?

I was inspired originally because I was traveling up to Shepparton from Melbourne and I found that really it was, it was hard for people to come and travel to centers, even like Shepparton. You know, they might be traveling from say, an hour or two or three or four away sometimes. And so I realised that perhaps a private practice might actually be

more agile and flexible in terms of providing those outreach services and in kind of building the workforce. Also, I could see some gaps in cardiovascular care for some vulnerable groups like female patients like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, refugee population.

So connected cardiology was really established predominantly with that in mind to actually better support those vulnerable groups focusing on regional, but also the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, which is quite large in Shepparton. And also, you know, really supporting women's heart health, where there's still very significant gaps as well.

As there is for so many aspects of women's health, and you started this in 2019, I'm sure it went well for a little while, and then 2020 happened. There must have been a few challenges in those early years.

That's actually a really good question. We, we saw our first patients in November, 2019 and, uh, three months later, but.

Interestingly, we'd actually based the practice largely on a, a small practice in Melbourne, and then was planning to knock on GPs doors for two the next two years and asked them to dust off the telehealth equipment that was sitting stagnant in the back room. And so three months later, funnily enough. It got really super busy and built really, really quickly because telehealth became the norm for kind of two years.

Yeah. but it did change the way that we needed to deliver care, and we still needed to continue providing some of those outreach services. Some of the outreach services during the pandemic, during the lockdowns actually stopped. So that meant that it was difficult for telehealth to replace everything.

So we were fortunate enough with connected to be able to continue those outreach services so we could see patients that might not be able to engage or be best assessed by telehealth in the regional areas.

And since then, what have you found the most rewarding about being a rural cardiologist?

The most rewarding is really feeling like that you're making an impact on heart health and we can already see that the impact that providing both patient care, but also healthcare, professional education in the area. What an impact that's already made. I can already see that compared with, you know, even a few years ago, people have better access to care, better outcomes, better quality of life often. So I guess that would be the major thing always. But I think the sense of connection as well, the connection in the community, it's so much easier to make connections and to get to know people and reach out and understand the area than in a larger city like Melbourne. And I love to learn about the different towns that are nearby and learning more and more about the

people and different industries, etc that are in these areas. I really love that, even just beyond the day-to-day, you know, really rewarding cardiology work.

Wonderful! And despite all those rewards, there would surely be a few other challenges aside from what we were speaking of, of COVID before, just starting up and working as you do in rural environments. What are some challenges that you've had to overcome?

So a few things. We also dealt with the floods as well. Just shortly after we moved up, major floods in Shepparton, Mooroopna particularly. So that was, a bit of a flick back to telehealth for a period. And just again, a bit of a traumatic event in the, in the community. So there's obviously that natural disaster kind of aspect at times. Apart from that, I'd say. To be honest, the sheer overwhelm can be quite a lot at times. The sheer overwhelm of the scarcity of healthcare professionals compared with the population that needs it. And, you know, heart health is an enormous issue, especially in Shepparton and this whole area really, it's a very socioeconomically disadvantaged area. So that really goes with, with poorer heart health and, and more cardiovascular risk factors. So there's the overwhelm, but how I tackle that is trying to I guess, harness the power of a lot of other healthcare professionals, so training nurses, engaging with some of the community services, helping with education events for GPs. We have a regional heart health forum just next week showcasing like lots of different aspects of cardiology care and, and bridging that gap in healthcare, professional knowledge sometimes. So I think. It's small steps forward all the time, and if you can make small steps and have lots of people making small steps forward all the time, that's where you can start to really make a big impact longer term.

Yeah, definitely. And there must be some fun stories that you've acquired along the way?

Oh, look, I, I'd just say like, there, there's a great sense of humor often and a great sense of gratitude for healthcare professionals in regional areas. And I'd just say generally that, have a good laugh with the patient. Sometimes it's, really great and I really enjoy hearing them all talking in the waiting room and, you know, catching up over the football scores and things like that. It's just a really great community feel. But my favorite thing was probably when a middle-aged gentleman came in to see me one day and started to say, oh, I've come in and, you know, I had a heart attack a few years before and it had some heart failure, but hadn't seen anyone for a while. And this is up at Cobram a few years ago. So that's about an hour north of Shepparton, and he came in and he said, oh look, I was talking to the, the older men in the community and they said, go and see Jennifer. You know, she'll tweak your medications, she'll get you right. And I thought that was just lovely because I'm always saying to patients that it might seem like little things, but tweaking your medications, that's what makes all the difference over time. And so to hear those words being repeated in the community was fabulous. Yeah, to feel like that you'd kind of had those ripples out, that people were having those conversations about

heart health and even making recommendations, encouraging each other to seek help, I thought that was, that was really fabulous. So that put a smile on my face that day.

Particularly fabulous given that, older men tend to not talk about their health so much. So that's a big win.

Can you share any other top tips or advice that you would give to other health professionals who are considering work in rural Victoria?

I'd say I think it's a great place to work and I definitely encourage people to consider working in regional Victoria. It's a really rewarding place, a really great sense of connection, connection to nature. But I'd say if you are working in regional Victoria, it's really important to consider who are your networks, what's your support system, particularly, you know, if you are needing to engage with healthcare professionals in Melbourne as well. Whether that's doctors or nurses, you know, really developing that. Approach of kind of having great coordinated care to try to make the connection seamless because at the end of the day, patients can be seen locally and managed a lot locally, but there are always times when people need to be going to services in Melbourne.

So just really working hard to develop a great network across regional metro divide. And I suppose I'd also say. If you're doing outreach to just think about sustainability, so trying to just think forward about how can you make this a sustainable thing rather than doing too much too quickly and then having more difficulty sustaining that because it is really important for communities to have that steady, constant, and consistent care.

So, to be trying to, to go once a month, for example, on a longer term basis or once every two months, rather than coming every week and then not being able to sustain that. I think it's just really important, you know, even if you're really keen, but just to think through how is that gonna work in the longer term? Because, you know, we want sustainable health services and. Connecting also with local services, wherever possible that are, that are established, whether that's in healthcare or you know, some of the community organisations as well, having those strong links locally.

Yeah, brilliant. You certainly don't want professionals jumping in with both feet and then burning themselves out in a few months.

Have you got any other thoughts that you'd like to share with us today, Jennifer?

Just that I think Regional Victoria is a great place to work and definitely I would encourage anyone to really give it a go. I certainly, had a lot of placements as a medical student and as an intern and really found that valuable and really enjoyable. So I guess that that's kind of led to, to me wanting to be part of the, a regional community. And so just, you know, I guess just embracing the idea of experimenting with different places

just outside of Metro Melbourne, because there are lots of different experiences to be had.

Fantastic. Well, we'll leave you to your day and enjoying the fine people and fresh air of Shepparton and, thank you so much for your time today.

Thanks so much, Andy. The Talk in Country Health Podcast is brought to you by The Rural Workforce Agency Victoria, connecting health professionals and communities in rural and Regional Victoria. Visit www.rw.com.au to learn more about our services and to explore a career in country Victoria.