

A woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt and blue trousers, stands leaning against a rustic wooden fence. The fence is made of weathered logs and runs across a grassy field. In the background, there's a body of water and a line of trees under a clear blue sky.

Care is never remote with Anna around

"My business card says 'nurse' but it should read nurse-social worker-teacher-ambulance driver-airstrip monitor!"

Anna Burley is not exaggerating when she describes the range of tasks that typically face Frontier Services' Remote Area Nurses scattered around the Outback.

Job descriptions can be pretty fluid when you're one of only a handful of nurses (no doctors) looking after 60,000 square kilometres of Far North Queensland.

Anna's patients live in the Etheridge and Croydon Shires which are dotted with small communities, family-owned cattle stations, mines and mango plantations. There is a significant Indigenous population.

The people are served by three Queensland Health nurses, and the Savannah Regional Health Service which is run by Frontier Services out of Georgetown. The nearest doctors are several hours' drive away in places like Cairns, Townsville and Atherton, and the Flying Doctor is on call in emergencies.

The Savannah service includes clinics twice a week at Mt Surprise, once a fortnight at Einasleigh and, starting last year, once a month at The Lynd.

Then there are the visits to stations, the first aid and human relationship classes, the

issues associated with stress and depression, relationship problems, and our regular quota of farm injuries," Anna says.

"I also run human relationships classes for primary school kids in Georgetown and Mt Surprise, courses on first aid for council workers, and lectures on domestic violence and sexual assault. I want to start running the first aid courses on stations when I get the time."

A key support for Anna's work has been participation in a trial of the Sustainable Farm Families program over the past two years.

Originating in the dairy industry in Victoria, the program seeks to educate station families about how good health fits into the total farm picture.

"We aim for prevention rather than cure."

odd stint driving patients to the coast — and ensuring that there are no cows or kangaroos on the airstrip when the Flying Doctor is coming in!

Anna has firm ideas about her role:

"We aim for prevention rather than cure.

"Our work is very much about getting people to prevent or manage 'lifestyle illnesses', like diabetes, heart disease and substance abuse, through diet, exercise, etc."

Diabetes, for example, is starting to become a major problem among residents, especially women.

"Prevention also extends to mental health

"People put a lot of effort into looking after their livestock and crops but neglect to put any effort into looking after their health.

"They don't realise that a back strain or a bout of depression can adversely impact their income as much as a bad season. Health needs to be factored into their sums."

As part of the program, Anna organised a series of workshops with station people with the emphasis on reducing risks: better nutrition, stress management, going to the doctor early before a niggle becomes a serious problem, addressing occupational health issues like wearing eye and ear protection.

Georgetown is a world away from Anna's initial career choice — as a merchant banker for 11 years!

"I guess I'm a bit of a slow learner — it took me all that time to realise what I really wanted to do," she says.

Anna retrained as a nurse and worked in emergency departments and then community health.

But a brief placement at Birdsville was her defining moment: "After that experience I was hooked, and realised that remote nursing was my thing."

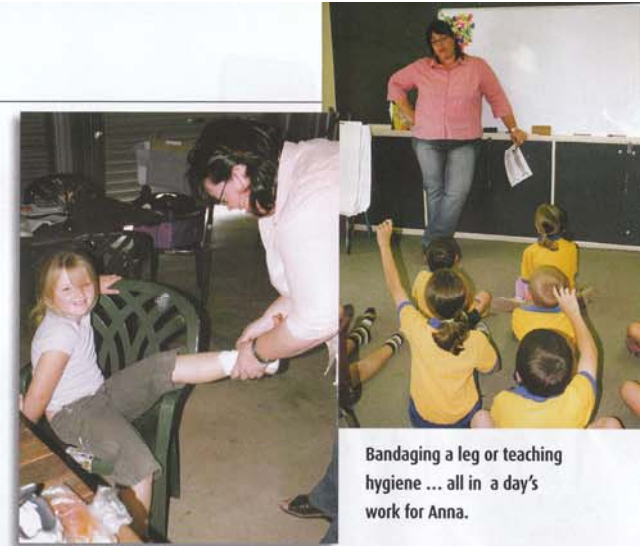
She moved on to agency work at Birdsville, Bedourie and on Cape York before settling in Georgetown two years ago.

So what's the appeal of remote area nursing?

"I'm not much of a bureaucrat — I'm very much 'hands on' and that's what this work is all about.

"You have to be as practical as the people you serve, and be able to think outside the square to deal with the challenges that life in the bush throws at you. You have to be confident that you can rely on yourself and your judgement a lot of the time.

"If someone's injured I might do everything from bandage their arm to drive them to the city to see a doctor and organise someone to look after their family while they're gone."



Bandaging a leg or teaching hygiene ... all in a day's work for Anna.

Anna says she also loves being part of the Frontier Services "family" — to be able to say to station clients that she can organise a RAFFS visit for them or bring in a carer.

"There's a wonderful camaraderie out here and our service is very much appreciated, judging by the comments I get and the growing attendance at our clinics."

To unwind from the stresses of the week, Anna paints and photographs the abundant natural beauty of her surroundings.

And what does the future hold?

"To continue promoting health and well-being to the people who live here and to make our service even better," she says.

"I also want to attract more people to live out here — we need physios, speech pathologists, podiatrists and a whole lot of other health professionals.

"They don't know what they're missing." TD