

From DJ to doctor: the unexpected career path of MIPS medico-legal advisor Dr Carrie McKenzie

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Healthcare has been a recurring theme throughout Dr McKenzie's working life. As a veterinary nurse, she loved the clinical and surgical aspects of the job, but it was communicating with people during stressful moments that stayed with her most. She admired those who could deliver difficult news well, offer reassurance and show compassion when it mattered.

After moving into nursing, she began thinking more closely about the parts of healthcare she found most meaningful. Applying for medicine felt like a long shot. "I never thought I would actually get accepted," she says. Her path into nursing had also taken persistence. "I had to do quite a lot of work to even get considered for my nursing degree, so I definitely made my own path harder! But perhaps richer in hindsight," she adds.

No experience is wasted

Dr McKenzie sees her earlier careers as invaluable rather than unrelated. "Everyone is the sum of their parts," she says. The skills and experiences accumulated along the way helped make her varied medical career possible.

Her time as a security guard is a case in point. Dr McKenzie abhors violence, so her strength was never physical force. Instead, she learnt to talk with people who were highly stressed or upset and to de-escalate difficult situations. That ability has supported her throughout medicine.

Responsibility, culture and advocacy

One of the most formative chapters of Dr McKenzie's career was spending six years as the sole doctor in an Aboriginal community outside Katherine. Moving from registrar to specialist while working alone brought immense responsibility and, at times, isolation and fear.

She had to learn the rules, and where the grey areas lay, to provide high-quality, culturally appropriate care. She became a fierce advocate for the community and sought mentors in unexpected places when complex ethical questions arose.

Dr McKenzie, who is of Aboriginal and Dutch heritage, says a senior Elder recognised her background and helped her make an instant connection with a community that previous doctors had limited engagement with. The trust that followed enabled an influenza research project that contributed to expanding vaccine access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of all ages. The experience remains central to how she practises and how she now supports doctors facing difficult circumstances.

"I was placed in so many tricky ethical situations, it has made me the advisor I am," she says.

Making medicine sustainable

Dr McKenzie's career has spanned general practice, emergency medicine, Aboriginal health, aged care, rural medicine, medical education, rural workforce development, academic leadership, board roles and medico-legal work. She describes herself as a true generalist: naturally curious, energised by learning and happiest with several roles at once.

That variety has also taught her the importance of sustainability. Rural doctors can feel indispensable, worrying about what will happen if they step away. Dr McKenzie now advocates taking regular breaks, setting firm boundaries and maintaining relationships with family, friends and colleagues. It's a lesson she learnt the hard way. These days, she starts planning the next holiday before the current one is over. "Whilst that could be a year away, it gives us a light at the end of the tunnel," she says.

Run your own race

Medico-legal work was another unplanned turn, but it felt like a natural progression. Dr McKenzie values helping doctors understand the systems around them and map out a path when they feel overwhelmed. As she puts it, "Where there is no knowledge, fear lives."

Her advice to postgraduate doctors is simple: focus less on where others are or where you think you "should" be. Medicine, like life, offers room to change direction, pursue an unusual opportunity and begin again. A year or two spent finding work you genuinely value is small in the context of a long career.

"Take a chance on that quirky job," she says. "You can usually always go back to what you were doing if it doesn't work out, and you might find it opens other doors."

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