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Commitment to ‘Health Care in the Western Desert’ on show in Medicine School

The University of Notre Dame Australia’s medical students traded their stethoscopes for a paintbrush during a recent excursion into the remote northwest, creating a major work of art that combines symbols of Western medicine with those of Aboriginal people from the region.

The two-metre-long painting showcases the talent of second-year medical students Ruth Smit, Peter Li and James Dodd, who completed the painting under the expert guidance of eight Aboriginal artists from the Wankatjunka, Kakutja and Walpirri language groups during the students’ week-long Kimberley Remote Area Health Placement.

Titled ‘Healthcare in the Western Desert, the painting was unveiled at a special ceremony at the School of Medicine on 26 October. It comprises three ‘snake and staff’ images representing the universal symbol of the medical profession. Also featured are horse-shoe shaped symbols depicting women and children from the local communities, rainbow-coloured squares to symbolise the medical clinics and a number of circular *jila* (waterholes).

“The painting represents more than just a symbol of working with Aboriginal and rural communities. It’s a physical manifestation of the relationships of trust and respect that deepen each year between students and staff of the School of Medicine and the communities in which they serve,” said Professor Donna Mak, Chair of Notre Dame’s Population and Preventive Health Domain, who purchased and donated the painting to the School of Medicine.

For the past ten years, all second-year medical students from Notre Dame’s Fremantle Campus have spent a week in West Kimberley outback communities as part of the School of Medicine’s unique practical experience program.

As part of the experience, students work alongside pastoral station owners, families working in rural health or education and Aboriginal elders to help them with their day-to-day tasks – ranging from back burning and land clearing to collaborating with not-for-profit groups to promote positive health practices.

“The trip gave me a glimpse into the human side of medicine that I had never experienced and provided me with a reminder as to why I’m studying medicine – to make a difference to the lives of others,” said Ruth.

Commenting on the unique aspects of Notre Dame’s Medicine degree, Professor Gervase Chaney, Dean of the School of Medicine said: “The University’s School of Medicine remains committed to the Kimberley Remote Area Health Placement program and, with support from our friends and partners, will continue to provide medical students with transformative learning experiences that will shape their views on medicine throughout their careers.”

Media Contact: Leigh Dawson +61 8 9433 0569 | 0405 441 093 | leigh.dawson@nd.edu.au

Caption: Medicine students Kelly Bell, James Dodd, Ruth Smit and Peter Li with Professor Gervase Chaney and Professor Donna Mak.



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