

MONDAY CONVERSATION...

PHOTO: LUKE HEMER

A HEALTHY TOWN IS THE NEW MAN'S PRESCRIPTION

ECHUCA REGIONAL HEALTH HAS A NEW MAN AT THE HELM AND *CHARMAYNE ALLISON* QUICKLY REALISED THIS FORMER MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL IS SO DETERMINED TO DELIVER ON THE HEALTH ASPECT OF HIS JOB HE WILL BE DELIGHTED IF HE CAN MAKE HIS SHINY NEW HOSPITAL OUT OF BOUNDS TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE

“ I want to make it so we're not needed. It's what drives me and motivates me – how can we improve so people don't have to come to the hospital? ”



ECHUCA Regional Health has a new chief executive running one of the newest (and best) hospitals in regional Victoria – and he's not planning on letting you use it.

Not now and preferably never. Because if you're in Echuca hospital it's probably not good news.

For you; or him. Nick Bush only wants to meet you in the street, your home, at a café, watching the football, anywhere you like – except 226 Service St, Echuca.

In his 26 years in the health industry, Nick has witnessed far too many lives balancing on a scalpel's edge.

Literally. He's seen organs poisoned by obesity, bodies ravaged from smoking and the insidious tendrils of drug and/or alcohol abuse and/or addiction.

But to him, the greatest tragedy is that most pain, illness – even early death – can be avoided.

Which is why, whether by increased services or more education in the community, Nick hopes you never visit his hospital.

“I want to make it so we're not needed,” he said. “It's what drives me and motivates me – how can we improve so people don't have to come to the hospital?”

They're the last words you'd expect from a chief executive – please don't use my business. But for Nick, ERH is more than a business. It's life or death. Yours, not his.

And rather than merely treating illnesses and injuries, he wants to prevent them in the first place. However, when Nick launched his career in 1992, the health sector didn't exactly share his view.

He was 23 and had just graduated from a Diploma of Nursing at Australian Catholic University in Ballarat.

Working at hospitals in Horsham, Nick was immediately immersed in the rewarding, demanding, heartbreaking and downright tragic frontline of healthcare.

Where he quickly discovered he wanted to be the person making the big decisions which would see hospitals (and the communities they served) flourish.

“Nursing was amazing and really shaped my desire to get into decision-making for health services,” he said.

“It gave me a real sense of where change and improvements needed to be made.

“Plus I had an understanding of the day-to-day operations of a health service. For instance, I knew

what it was like to do shift work – that alone gave me great insight.

“And I saw the good parts, as well as the parts that didn't work so well.”

Above all, Nick saw there was a lack of focus on improving the greater health and wellbeing of the community.

“As a nurse I thought, surely there's got to be policies and structural change that prevent people from needing to be admitted to hospital,” he said.

“But in the early to mid-'90s there was very little emphasis on health and wellbeing, it was more about just treating illnesses and injuries when they showed up at the hospital.

“And while that's important too, we needed to address the core problem.”

One issue Nick noticed was a lack of connection between hospitals and other crucial community services.

Services such as general practices; pharmacies, community nursing and disability and social services.

“For a period, I was working in accident emergency and we had one frequent attendee who was largely seeking refuge from an unsafe housing arrangement,” he said.

“The person wasn't really in need of medical

attention, but was more looking for a place of refuge, somewhere they were warm and cared for.

“Back then, there wasn't a great system available to provide support for this type of person, and our community-based response needed to be drastically improved.

“It was tragic seeing that person show up time after time looking for help – and I thought, we need to do this better.”

After several years working as a nurse in Horsham, Nick completed a critical care course at Monash Medical Centre in Melbourne.

Then, in 1995, he took on his first senior management position as manager of Hopetoun Hospital.

It was the first step towards his dream career, which eventually led him to become deputy chief executive at Rural Northwest Health at Warracknabeal.

In 2001, he and his family moved back to the big smoke when Nick took a position as operations manager at Inner East Community Health Service in Richmond.

While city living had its charms, Melbourne living became far too expensive for the family.

Finally, in 2003, financial pressure pushed the family to Cobram District Health.

And while it's difficult to match the 11-year stint of ERH's previous chief executive, Nick is certainly no stranger to the long haul.

He worked for seven years as chief executive of Cobram's hospital, followed by eight years in the same position at East Grampians Health Service in Ararat.

And now, Echuca. It will be the largest health service Nick has worked at.

But he doesn't seem daunted. Instead, his eyes light up as he talks about ERH's future.

“There's so much potential for the future of this hospital,” he said.

“I have a lot of optimism around this service's future growth.”

Nick said this growth was necessitated by increased cuts in services at neighbouring hospitals.

Such as Kyabram District Health Service, which has cut after-hours doctors, providing medical support and consultation via videolink instead.

A cut forced due to a shortage of doctors available in the small town to work the extra hours.

And it's a doctor drought which spreads far beyond Kyabram's borders, affecting regional hospitals across Australia.

But which Nick said makes the need for ERH to

continue to grow even more urgent.

“We need to fill that void,” he said.

“The decreases in services around Echuca mean an increased need for services here.

“We're lucky this new hospital has been built, it's come at the perfect time. It has a fantastic, large emergency department.

“Plus it's a teaching hospital. It's the perfect set-up for training future doctors, nurses and allied health professionals.

“The hospital has even converted the former nursing home into 40 rooms of student accommodation, which is a brilliant idea.”

Nick said other areas of future growth included strengthening community response and setting up more hospital-based care in the community such as hospital in the home and palliative care at home.

But, reflecting on his almost three decades in the business, he admitted change wouldn't come without its challenges.

“It's always difficult balancing financial viability with increasing demand,” he said.

“And ensuring the health service's building and equipment is up to date in tight financial times can be a challenge.

“Thankfully staff and the community generally understand when tough decisions need to be made,

such as ceasing certain services to reduce costs.”

One thing his experience has taught him: a vibrant community makes for a vibrant health service.

And he said Echuca's is certainly that.

“We had 60 people show up at our community board meeting recently – and it was a cold, wet, rainy night,” he said.

“In a town that's not vibrant, those people would just stay home and stay warm. But in Echuca, people really care what happens to their town and to their hospital.”

In addition to increasing services in the community, Nick said he hoped ERH would continue to take a leadership position on health issues plaguing our town – regardless of whether that is sugar, smoking, obesity or drug and/or alcohol abuse.

“We need to be taking a stand and supporting the other agencies whose focus is to combat these issues,” he said.

Nick's vision for ERH's continued growth is filled with positivity, possibility and potential – lots of potential.

But he's not stepping into the great unknown alone – he's joined in Echuca by wife Celine and children Edmund, 15, and Philippa, 11, while eldest daughter Genevieve, 17, will continue with school

in Melbourne.

“It's always hard relocating and having to set up a new friendship and support group,” he said.

“But we're looking forward to the change and opportunities ERH and living in Echuca presents.”

So exactly what is Nick's ultimate goal for ERH?

First and foremost; offer a service where locals no longer need to travel long distances to receive life-saving medical care.

“Throughout my time as a nurse I saw firsthand how difficult it was for people from rural areas whose family were receiving treatment far from home,” he said.

“It was particularly tough on people who were financially struggling because how could they afford to go to Melbourne and stay several nights in expensive accommodation while their family member was in hospital?

“This is why it's important for ERH to provide as many services as it can, so people don't have to leave their communities to receive the care they need.”

Or in Nick's most perfect of worlds, the care they won't need.