

This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2001. The published version may have had minor changes.

## **The Profile: Frank Reed**

CV in brief

1996- present: GP, Lord Howe Island  
1982-96: GP, Tumut  
1976: University of NSW, MBBS

### **ISLAND IDYLL**

Before you meet Frank Reed, there's a few things you should know about the unusual spot where he sought refuge from the stressed-out lot of the country GP.

It's the sort of place where there are far more bicycles than cars, where the main job for the only policeman for miles (and miles) is stopping cyclists not wearing safety helmets, and where visitors are told not to bother locking anything. It's a bit like a small country town might have been fifty years ago.

It's also the sort of place where the only true local is the one born there, and where the locals are only half joking when they answer the phone saying, "halfway to heaven". Lord Howe Island, 780 km north-east of Sydney, is not only one of the most beautiful, unspoilt places imaginable; it also happens to have a high concentration of churchgoers among its 400-odd residents.

Not that Frank Reed knew all that when he read an article some years back about how a doctor called John Blyth was having trouble finding someone to take over his job on the island. After several years of isolated practice, Blyth felt he needed to refresh his acute care skills by working in a mainland hospital.

At the time, Reed was looking for an escape from the whirlwind that his life in Tumut, a town of about 7,000 in south-western NSW, had become. Working hours at his surgery were long and demanding, and the out-of-hours calls never stopped. Reed remembers reading that Blyth was seeing about as many patients in a week as he was seeing in a day.

Between all the work and social demands, there was hardly time for his wife Judy or their four young children, who were tied up anyway with a zillion different activities. Reed's own health was beginning to suffer; nothing too serious but enough to make him notice.

Five years later and those tribulations are just dusty memories now. Reed, 50, is glowing with good health and wellbeing when he pulls into the front of the Gower Wilson Memorial Hospital on his mountain bike. The hospital is only a few seconds' ride from the nearby family home and little more than a stone's throw from the pristine waters which helped earn the island World Heritage listing in 1982.

Reed is wearing his standard office attire - shorts, sandals and a relaxed smile - and conducts the guided tour of the three-bed hospital with pride. It averages 25-35 admissions a year, will eventually become a multipurpose service, and comes under the umbrella of the South Eastern Sydney Area Health Service, which appointed Reed and pays his overheads. Reed also receives subsidised rent and travel.

The first room we inspect "rarely has a patient in it" and is mostly used as a bedroom when the dentist visits every three months. The main ward has two beds, and the storage room doubles as morgue if necessary: "If we need to hold a body, we move out the medical equipment and turn on the air conditioner," Reed says.

The hospital is well endowed - Reed does his own X-rays and only one item remains on his equipment wish-list, a blood fridge to eliminate the delay of three to eight hours before blood can be flown to the island in an emergency. Locals have raised more than \$200,000 in recent years for the hospital, an achievement thanks in no small part to the well heeled tourists that the island tends to attract.

Lord Howe is not cheap to visit and its low-key, no-fuss approach has made it a popular destination amongst prominent business, political and arts figures. Reed rattles off a long list of celebrities he has met here, including former NSW Premier Neville Wran, a regular visitor and "a very pleasant man to meet".

When he arrived, Reed expected to enjoy the tourist aspect of the practice the least, but has found they “balance the workload nicely. They are such interesting people, being achievers and successful people.”

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Some months ago, Brisbane couple Arthur and Jill Apelt came to the island for a holiday their family had given them for their 50th wedding anniversary, according to the local paper, The Signal.

“Arthur was not going to miss a moment to explore the stunning island that looked so great from the air,” it reported. “He changed, grabbed a back pack and a map that was in his unit and took off for Middle beach.”

He never returned. It is assumed that he either fell or was knocked over by a wave and was swept out to sea.

The disappearance was not just front-page news on Lord Howe. When Arthur’s remains were later found in a tiger shark caught near the island, the story made national headlines, although local policeman John Gerits says the early reports were not entirely correct - it hadn’t been the couple’s wedding anniversary.

The tragedy had a profound effect on many locals, and Reed was also involved in counselling the missing man’s wife.

He has quite a few other dramatic stories of island medicine. Like the time he had to retrieve a sailor with appendicitis by climbing a ladder from a small boat to a 15,000 tonne container ship powering through heaving seas at night.

And the time he was called to a naval ship to check an injured sailor, and ended up spending the afternoon in the sumptuous officers’ quarters, chatting with the captain and enjoying silver service. “Things like that a Tumut GP doesn’t get to do very often,” he says.

But, apart from calls to dental emergencies and sick dogs, birds and cows, his work involves the usual variety of general practice. He consults from 9am til 12.30pm during the week and is on call the rest of the time, averaging two out-of-hours calls a day in summer and one in winter.

Area health service policy holds that locals be encouraged to give birth on the mainland, but there have been three births on the island during Reed's time, which partly reflects "the badge of honour" for those locally born.

Alcohol and drugs are a problem for some of the locals, but Reed says the community's health is generally good. "Peoples' bones here are very, very strong because of the active life," he says. "None have drastic osteoporosis."

In between their regular visits to the island, specialists are only a telephone call away, as are emergency air retrievals. Reed says it is a job for a mature doctor and that his time as a country doctor gave him the experience and confidence to cope with the isolation.

"I have got the experience to know what I know and what I don't know," he says.

Unlike most isolated doctors, Reed has no problem finding locums, with at least 15 on a waiting list, meaning he manages a break from the island about three times a year for CME, shopping and holidays.

Lord Howe may fit many people's vision of paradise, but that does not mean life is always simple - and it certainly is not cheap, with petrol costing up to \$1.60 a litre, lettuces sometimes hitting the \$6 mark, and the Reeds spending about \$55,000 annually on boarding school fees (the local primary school is well regarded but the only local option for older students is high school by correspondence).

Community leaders also have to tread a careful path through the many local intrigues. The population is divided according to which of the two supply boats they support (one is cheaper and the other is locally owned). It is also divided between those who support the churches, with the Seventh Day Adventists having a strong following, and those who support what Reed calls the island's "fourth church", the bowling club.

Reed and his wife are among the few to attend both Anglican and Adventist services, in an effort to foster unity. Reed has enjoyed "a relationship with God" since his childhood; his mother was converted in a Billy Graham crusade.

His involvement with churches and community activities has been useful for spreading health messages as well as for getting to know the locals, who can be difficult to crack - one resort manager told me that although he had lived and worked on the island for ten years, he was yet to be invited to any local's home socially.

The community is also divided between those who make their living from the tourist trade versus those who would be happy never to see another tourist again (only 400 visitors are allowed at any one time). And between those who line up with the Thompsons, one of the island's original families, versus those who line up with the Wilsons. And so it goes.

Sometimes, Reed admits, it would be nice to have your own plane to provide an instant escape whenever it all gets too much. He seems to enjoy chatting about the local gossip, presumably because he doesn't normally get much of a chance to do so. After all, everyone on the island is a potential patient. With one notable exception.

"I am probably the most at risk person on the island if something traumatic happens to me," he says.

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Reed, the youngest of four, grew up near Cabramatta in south-western Sydney and went to the local high school. His father was a mechanic who went on to run a small trucking business. "My father was a workaholic and he passed that unfortunate trait to us," says Reed.

If not for a year as an exchange student in the United States, staying with a surgeon, it probably never would have occurred to Reed that someone with his working class roots could ever become a doctor.

He didn't enjoy the rote learning of the University of NSW medical course in the 1970s and failed second year. He may never have finished the course if he had not been drafted into the Army during the Vietnam war - "a strong incentive to get back into medicine".

"So I stuck at it and am very glad that I did," he says. "Medicine is a privileged position to have insight into so many lives."

As a resident, he pushed to work in country and suburban hospitals. “I wanted experience,” he says. “If you want to go places, you rub shoulders with the powerbrokers in the teaching hospitals but you may only get to fill out forms whereas in country towns like Wagga and Lae in PNG, they treated you like a doctor. To this day I am grateful for the training I got from the nursing sisters at Wagga Base.”

Reed was on track to become a surgeon when his sister dropped dead suddenly at 31. She had been suffering anxiety and depression, and was driven to be “an overachiever”.

Her death made Reed re-think his priorities, as he saw himself as having a similar make-up to his sister. He gave away surgical training, thinking general practice would be easier. “I was wrong,” he says.

When he moved to Tumut in 1982, the first six months were quiet and enjoyable. “And then it got frantic and it stayed frantic, and then after ten years I started to slip slowly into early burnout.”

When Reed first mentioned the Lord Howe job to his wife, Judy, she was reluctant to uproot the family. But John Blyth’s wife got on the phone and convinced her that the island was the perfect place to bring up children.

The Reeds have no regrets about the move, saying they have become closer as a couple and a family, as well as healthier. The children have threatened to divorce their parents if they ever leave.

“We live a very simple life which we both love,” says Judy. Apart from community activities, Reed finds plenty of time to indulge his love of waterskiing. Knowing his distaste for fishing (he can’t bear to kill anything), the locals are happy to share fresh catch with him.

The islanders appear very pleased with their doctor, with many saying he is known for being approachable at any hour and for his kindness. “I’ve heard nothing but good reports,” adds John Blyth, who now works at Port Macquarie Hospital.

Kara Lonergan, a nurse who came to work briefly on the island 15 years ago but stayed after falling for a local, says Reed has the perfect personality for what can be a tough job, being on call permanently. “You

couldn't dislike Frank; he doesn't say a bad thing about anyone," she says.

Kerry McFadyen, a medical graduate who is part owner of one of the best known resorts, Pine Trees, says the island is lucky to have found such an excellent doctor, who is "kind and careful and competent".

Reed has another two years to his contract, and is not sure whether to stay beyond that. "I don't rule it out, but you can never be an islander," he says referring to the privileges accorded those born on Lord Howe versus those who merely have permanent resident status (earned after 10 years).

If Reed does eventually move on, it will be with much sadness: "There are just not enough Lord Howe islands for weary GPs in country towns and country Australia."