This is the unedited version of a profile which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

Profile: Mark Wenitong

There has been enough hardship in Mark Wenitong's life - the tough upbringing, the ugly discrimination, the heavy responsibility borne by Aboriginal doctors - that its telling could inspire tears and anger.

But that's not how Wenitong paints his story. Laughter punctuates his conversation so regularly and he exudes such a gentle good humour that he leaves an impression of what is positive and possible in Aboriginal health.

Thank heavens for music, though. Without the escape found in his guitar, Wenitong might not have coped so well with the tribulations his work has involved, whether advising Federal Health Ministers, treating prisoners, or watching heart disease debilitate his young Aboriginal patients.

Wenitong, a GP at the Wuchopperen Aboriginal Medical Service in Cairns, may be one of the elders of indigenous medicine (at 44, this is a measure of Australia's tardiness in recruiting Aborigines to medicine) but gives the feeling that deep down he is as much muso as doctor.

Music helped fund his medical studies back in the early 90s when he was one of the first Aboriginal medical students at the University of Newcastle. Wenitong, a mature age student with four children to support, played in a reggae and hip hop band with his then wife to pay the rent and university fees. Sometimes their teenage son joined them on stage, rapping.

When he graduated, Wenitong remembers being interviewed by an ABC TV crew. They stuck a microphone in front of him and demanded, "how are you going to solve the Aboriginal health problem?"

Asked how he replied, Wenitong laughs. "I was an intern, I was just trying not to kill anybody."

He decided to become a doctor after 11 years working as a pathology laboratory technician made him acutely aware of the high infection rates in his community and more interested in Aboriginal issues.

Having learnt the same school lessons as the rest of his generation, from history books that talked of 'treacherous blacks', Wenitong began to read widely about Australian history. He visited the US and felt he was treated with more respect there than in his own country.

"When you walked into a store, I really noticed how you got treated like a real person. You got treated differently in Australia," he says.

Wenitong's personal experiences of the health system also made him aware of the need for change. He suffered terribly from migraines as a young adult, and would present at the local hospital's accident and emergency department with nausea and vomiting. Inevitably, he was accused of being drunk. Whenever he denied this, he was called a liar, and left without help.

"I had the worst experiences of my life there," he says quietly, but then adds with a laugh:"I thought, this is a good thing to try and change from the inside."

Asked why those times do not seem to have left an angry mark, he explains: "There are a few Aboriginal people I talk to who have a philosophy that it doesn't matter what happened yesterday but fulfil your potential today."

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Wenitong grew up in an old house, with hessian bags for windows, on the outskirts of the coastal Queensland town of Gladstone, the youngest in a family of six. His father was violent, an alcoholic and often in jail. His mother Lorna was one of Queensland's first Aboriginal health workers.

"She still opens up doors," laughs Wenitong. "I go to do community consultation from Mossman (subs this is correct spelling of the Qld town) to the Centre, and they say you are Lorna's little boy - you are supposed to be a big shot doctor."

Wenitong was the only one of his siblings to finish high school and he's still not really sure how he got to university. Maybe, he adds, it's to do

with his mother being a “really full-on Christian who brought us all up with a belief in God”.

“I believe God’s hand in my life has been the main reason I have gotten anywhere,” he says.

After medical school, Wenitong worked for World Vision in Central Australia, training health workers. He divided his time between a remote community 400 km north-west of Alice Springs and staying with his family in inner Sydney.

It was his first time in Central Australia and, being a salt water person, he expected to hate being away from the coast.

Instead, he enjoyed learning from traditional elders, an opportunity he had not had growing up at a time when Queensland Aborigines were not allowed to practise their culture or speak their own language.

“It taught me about being Aboriginal,” says Wenitong. “It taught me to shut up and listen, to understand the traditional perspective more.”
He also gained a new insight into Aboriginal concepts of health and traditional healing.

“It’s pretty powerful medicine,” he says. “It’s been around for 40,000 years, which is a little more than my experience of five years at medical school. The Aboriginal side of me believes there is a spiritual side of healing and we probably don’t utilise that enough in western medicine.”

His next job was advising the Commonwealth Government on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, where he learnt a lot about bureaucratic and political processes. But the Canberra culture and climate was a shock to the system, and he was relieved after a few years to return the warmth and familiarity of Cairns.

As well as clinical and health promotion work at Wuchopperen and in prisons, he is involved in men’s groups and is a member of several national committees, including the Council advising the Federal Minister on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. He is also a mentor for indigenous students at James Cook University.

Involvement in policy-making helps him cope with the frustrations of grassroots work, where grief and loss are the norm for many patients. "You see too many people dying of preventable disease at an early age and you just don't seem to be able to do anything about it," he says.

The music also helps. It's a gift which must be in his genes; daughter Naomi sings in the successful pop group Shakaya which toured recently with Destiny's Child.

"It's so nice, just going and playing," says Wenitong, "and you don't think too much about Aboriginal health, or anything."