

# Death on a dirt road

**Every rural GP knows the tragedy of road death in a small town. In January, Warialda faced a disaster it will never forget. MELISSA SWEET revisits this extraordinary day – the emergency operation, retrievals hindered at every turn, and a town in mourning.**

PHOTOS BRUCE MILLER

IT was the final Friday afternoon of the summer school holidays. Just outside Warialda, a small town nestled prettily among well-wooded hills in north-western NSW, the noise of a ute stopping and starting was interrupting the silence of a tranquil bush road.

Local teenagers were taking turns to have ‘driving lessons’. Six were on the back of the ute when it skidded out of control and flipped, with a 14-year-old girl allegedly behind the steering wheel.

Amid the ensuing chaos, someone had the presence of mind to find a mobile phone. When emergency service workers arrived at Racecourse Road about 2.30pm, they met a scene of devastation that seemed incongruous with the state of the ute, which was relatively unscathed.

“I’m dying,” screamed a teenage boy. He was bleeding profusely, his scalp torn from ear to ear, revealing the bone of his skull. Another boy with a badly fractured leg was also extremely agitated, while a girl was bleeding heavily from a nasty facial laceration. The 32-year-old ute owner was complaining loudly of neck, shoulder and back pain.

Most alarming, however, were the three bodies lying quietly on the ground, with hardly a mark on them. But the blood spilling from their ears, noses and mouths signalled the seriousness of their injuries. One 13-year-old girl was dead and the other two, a boy and girl, were deeply unconscious.



Of the eight people who'd been in the ute, the driver alone escaped without obvious physical injury. An SES worker spoke quietly to her, trying to settle her hysteria.

Members of the ambulance, fire brigade and SES worked smoothly together, triaging patients and preparing them for transfer to hospital. Police secured the area to keep out distressed family members.

One hour and five minutes after arriving at the scene, ambulance officer Paul Beaver watched with some satisfaction as the final patient was driven away. He was pleased the seriously injured had reached hospital within that critical golden hour.

Meanwhile, Sharon Baker, the manager of the local hospital, was being driven back to Warialda after learning of the accident during an executive meeting at Inverell. As the countryside flew by, Ms Baker was doing a mental stocktake of what supplies were at the hospital, what might be needed, and where extra supplies could be sourced.

As she picked up her phone to ring nearby hospitals for help, Ms Baker thanked her stars the accident had coincided with the afternoon changeover of the nursing shift. Later she was glad that she'd thought to arrange

for family members of the 12 aged care patients to come to the hospital to free up her staff.

In 25 years of nursing, Ms Baker had never struck an emergency of such a scale, but had often wondered how she would cope. As she pushed through the worried crowd gathering outside the hospital, Ms Baker was relieved to note that she felt calm and in control.

The town's GPs, Drs Clem Gordon and Di Coote, were busy at their surgery when they heard there had been a "bus crash". After driving to the hospital, just a few minutes up the road, Dr Coote sent a message back to her husband. "Tell Clem to get his butt up here."

At first, Dr Coote did not recognise the unconscious boy. Many of the emergency service workers had also struggled to put names to the faces, among the dirt, blood and confusion. It was a jolt when Dr Coote realised he was 13-year-old Kallem Warrener, well known around town for his love of dirt bike riding. She had become close to his mum when helping to care for his dying grandmother, and her husband had treated Kallem's dad for a minor ailment only that morning.

Dr Coote saw that Kallem's pupils were fixed and

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The scene of the accident in Warialda, which claimed three lives and left a town devastated.





Peter Laitmer

Critical care physician Dr Chris Trethewy, who survived the Westpac helicopter crash (left) but continued on to help at the Warialda Hospital.

spinning blades. They were stiff and sore but, apart from Mr Yeo's bleeding nose, had sustained no obvious injuries. They dusted themselves off, shared a group hug and cracked a few jokes to relieve the tension.

Then Dr Trethewy made the phone call "you never want to make, to tell your wife you've just crashed". The next morning his six-year-old son would be terrified by a newspaper photograph of the smashed helicopter, a \$2.5 million write-off. A subsequent investigation would attribute the engine failure to a catastrophic failure of a part.

When a local farmer turned up in his ute within minutes of the crash, there was no question for the two medics but that they would continue on to Warialda. They'd survived a disaster but knew the Warialda doctors were still dealing with one.

Arriving at the hospital, both men, themselves pale-faced, were struck by the pleading, questioning expressions on the faces of the crowd. They are looking at us to provide answers, thought Mr Harris.

The chaotic scenes that greeted the two men inside were, as one worker quipped, like "M.A.S.H. on steroids". As he triaged and helped prepare patients for transfer, Mr Harris experienced a sense of euphoria. He was still alive.

Amid the pressures of the job at hand and some confusion about patients' identities, time passed before the doctors were able to respond to the anxious queries about patients.

Local nurses and emergency workers felt caught in an impossible position: they knew the families but were

unable to tell them what had happened to their children.

With four young children of his own, Dr Trethewy was painfully conscious of the impact of the bad news he had to break, that he did not expect Kallem or Amanda to survive.

"I will never forget looking at those families' faces and describing the injuries to these beautiful children," he said later. "Doing that for one child is something which anyone who works in emergency medicine finds difficult. Doing that for seven children, back to back, with such a spectrum of injury, that was heart breaking."

A month after the accident, tears would come to the eyes of an SES volunteer, Kim Prentis, when he thought of the helicopter heroes turning up to work after their own near-death experience.

"I will never stop thinking about that," said Mr Prentis who attended the scene and helped at the hospital. "That is total dedication. I said to Di (Dr Coote), 'they must have left their capes at the door'."

**A**manda Maitland was having an afternoon snooze when she heard her son, Andrew, calling out to her in a dream. When she awoke, she still had a feeling something was wrong.

But when her husband Glen came home and said there'd been an accident, it didn't occur to her that Andrew might be involved. She'd last seen him heading for the park with his friend Kallem for a water balloon fight.

It was only when two of Andrew's friends knocked on

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A tribute to Kalle Warrener at the crash scene.

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the door, a few hours after the accident, that panic struck. Mr Maitland jumped in his ute and was half way to the hospital before he realised his wife wasn't beside him.

"What do you know?" she asked when she caught up with him. "Nothing, they won't tell me anything," he replied angrily. Gasping for breath, Mrs Maitland collapsed in a panic attack. She couldn't understand why no one could tell her whether her son was dead or alive.

Slowly, the Maitlands began to realise the scale of the disaster; that other parents were also anxiously waiting to discover their children's fate. As they learnt that Andrew was still alive, others were hearing much grimmer news.

Simon Waller, an Anglican minister, was trying to calm anxious, angry parents and liaise with the emergency workers. He made sure he was present when the doctors finally emerged with news, knowing the families would hear only some of what they were told.

Plans to transfer patients were disrupted by one incident after another. Later, Mr Prentice would describe it as a day when "Murphy ruled". One ambulance broke down; another picked up a nail in its tyre. A storm broke, just as two aircraft were about to take off with four patients bound for Sydney. It stranded a third aircraft at Moree, and the three remaining patients who'd been readied for air transfer, including Andrew Maitland, were then diverted to travel in ambulances to Tamworth.



Crash survivor Andrew Maitland, with his mother Amanda.

Shortly after 9pm, Dr Gordon was just settling down at home to have a quiet coffee. Reflecting on his day's work, he felt that everything that could have been done had been done. He took both satisfaction and solace from that thought.

The phone rang. There'd been another motor vehicle accident: a 35-year-old man was deeply unconscious with serious head injuries. At the hospital, staff struggled to find the supplies they needed. Their resources had been depleted, in every sense. Dr Gordon manually ventilated the patient until

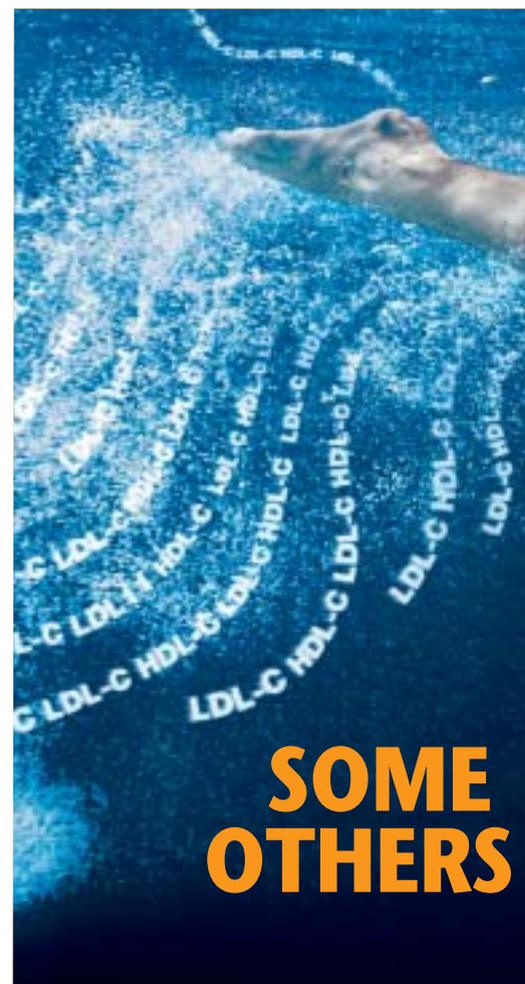
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1.30am when an ambulance retrieval team arrived from Tamworth.

By his side was Sharon Baker, who didn't get home to her rural property until 4am. It was a gruelling end to what had already been a tough enough day.

Meanwhile, Kallem Warrener's family was still on the road to see Kallem in Sydney, after bumping into the Maitlands at a Tamworth service station. Mrs Warrener had \$800 in her pocket, donated by local good samaritans who had also fuelled her car for the trip, as well as fitting two new tyres and changing the oil.

When the Warreners finally arrived at Sydney Children's Hospital at Randwick on Saturday morning, they were taken immediately to Kallem's bedside. There they decided that his organs would give others a chance of life. After his life support was turned off that afternoon, they stayed by his side until Sunday morning. Amanda Butler's life support was turned off a few days later, bringing the toll of the accident to three, including Emma Smith who died at the scene.

Also on the road into the early hours of Saturday morning was Dr Coote. She pulled into Brisbane at 2am for a few hours' sleep before collecting her daughter Lizzie, a 5th-year medical student from Cairns, to drive her four-and-a-half hours to compete in a triathlon at Goondiwindi.

When told that her husband had been called to another accident victim, Dr Coote turned to her daughter and said: "Lizzie, why are you doing medicine?"

The silence in Warialda over the weekend was eerie. It was as if the entire town was in shock. People were reluctant to speak too much about the accident; they knew that so many were affected, one way or another.

Many thoughts were with the girl who'd been charged with driving the ute. At the funeral and memorial services, parents made clear they did not blame her.

Early on Saturday morning, teachers met to plan for the return to high school of their 250 students. The principal, Phillip Steer, who had only just moved to Warialda in his first job as principal, arranged counsellors, and set up the library as a sanctuary where students and staff could find peace and quiet.

At the hospital, several debriefings were held to examine what had worked well and what could have been done better. Dr Trethewy reassured the health and emergency workers they'd done a magnificent job. The scale of the accident would have been overwhelming for any metropolitan trauma unit, he said.

Communication difficulties were a recurring issue, in particular the need for better systems for identifying and managing information about patients. Sharon Baker made a mental note to ensure the new hospital building, due for completion in 2008, had a prominent white board to assist with this.

In a letter to the local paper thanking everyone involved in

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**One ambulance broke down; another picked up a nail in its tyre. A storm broke, just as two aircraft were about to take off with four patients bound for Sydney.**



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the town's response, she singled out the patients' families and friends for their "patience and understanding under extreme circumstances".

"Not having information of your loved ones would have been heartbreaking but you waited quietly and gave us time to ensure the information you were given was accurate. Your courage will never be forgotten."

As the shock began to recede, anger emerged. Much was directed at the media, whose insistent calls to the hospital, school and families were often not appreciated. One student was so devastated by being quoted in a newspaper article she couldn't face coming to school.

Many locals were also unhappy to see television cameras and photographers at the services. The minister, Mr Waller, asked one television crew to respect the family's wishes and not film the casket, and was furious that night when he saw it on TV.

The weeks after the accident passed in a blur for Mr Waller. In 15 years as a minister, he had never been so busy or so stretched.

Many people struggled with the accident's aftermath. Some were referred to mental health and counselling services, but others were reluctant to seek help.

The Maitlands worried about Andrew, who refused to have counselling. Angry and upset, he constantly played the songs from Kallem's funeral. Sharon Baker kept in regular touch with affected families and staff, worried that someone might fall through the cracks.

The GPs saw the impact on many of their patients. Dr Coote worried that the criminal charges might exacerbate the problems already facing the girl who'd allegedly been driving the ute. When some of the town's anger turned towards the ute's owner, Dr Coote also worried for his welfare.

After church one Sunday a few weeks after the accident, she and Dr Gordon drove out to Racecourse Road. They inspected the fluffy toys, artificial flowers and heartfelt notes that adorned the three roadside memorials. As they tried to piece together what had happened in those few fateful minutes on that terrible Friday, they knew that many in their community would struggle to put the pieces of their lives back together again. ●



## A partnership that shines

Any relationship surviving 17 years is likely to yield a few trials and tribulations, as well as a deeper understanding. The people of Warialda and their doctors have come to know each other well since Drs Clem Gordon and Di Coote set up joint practice there in 1990.

Locals call Dr Gordon, "the honey doctor", knowing his predilection for packing wounds with honey, a trick he learnt from a Middle Eastern colleague. They know how much he enjoys his Sunday afternoon golf, a rare chance for respite.

He is also famous for his "uniform", a neatly ironed white shirt and white trousers worn every day, and still laundered by the same woman, who took up the task when he first arrived in town.

Locals know they can call on their doctors at any hour of any day, and that even their pets won't be turned away.

Dr Gordon is the one to see when wounds and injuries need fixing, while it is Dr Coote's kind, helpful manner that is sought in times of emotional trouble.

But perhaps only Dr Gordon, 53, and Dr Coote, 51, can truly appreciate the load they have shouldered, caring for a tightly knit community of which they and their four children are also a part.

The sacrifices began before they arrived in Warialda, which means "place of wild honey" in the language of the original inhabitants.

Several years after they graduated from the University of Queensland, Dr Gordon left his wife juggling young children and rural practice in Blackwater, Queensland, to study anaesthetics in

London, to improve his skills for rural practice.

"It was terrible leaving the family," he says.

Moving to Warialda meant further separations. All the children went to boarding school and Dr Coote spent many weekends on the road. Sending them away was one of the most difficult things of living here," Dr Gordon says.

With 6500 patients on their books, in a town of 1300, work dominates their lives. Twelve-hour days are usual.

While Dr Coote turns to her friends for support and relaxation, Dr Gordon's outlet has been in study. He has been an external student since 1990, doing a BA in ancient history and archaeology, as well as courses in Latin, Italian and French. He has also studied acupuncture, family medicine, children's health and emergency medicine.

"What I have found in an isolated place is you use every bit of knowledge you have got," he says.

Dr Gordon does not drink, being permanently on call, and socialises rarely.

"You have to be available for the town," he says. "You never know when you will be needed, when that call is going to come."

But the job has brought its own rewards, including professional satisfaction and the town's respect. Colin Cuell, a NSW fire brigade officer who worked alongside the doctors after the accident, says: "We are one of the bloody luckiest country towns in NSW to have two doctors like them. They complement each other."

SES volunteer Kim Prentis adds: "They are just an amazing couple. They are something special."



**Emergency care  
in rural practice**

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