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*DR Jacinta Power  
JCU Medicine Graduate and GP Fellow*

## A powerful force for Indigenous health

For Townsville GP Jacinta Power, seeing women through their pregnancies, the birth of their babies and watching their children grow never grows old.

“I really love women’s health. I think that’s what keeps me going. I get to see the pregnant women, the new babies and then the children. It’s definitely my area”

The former JCU medical student Fellowed as a General Practitioner through JCU General Practice Training in Townsville last year. Making her only the second Indigenous doctor to complete the program so far.

Dr Power completed the final years of her specialty training with the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS) and has remained with the service as a GP and cultural mentor.

As an indigenous doctor, she always wanted to use her skills to better the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“I wanted to do indigenous health, whether it was a mainstream clinic with a focus on indigenous health, or in an Indigenous organisation.

“There’s a spiritual connection there, another level of connection. Whatever specialty I chose, it was always going to be something that I would use to help my people,” Dr Power said.

Working in the Aboriginal medical service has allowed her to do just that. A decision validated by a chance meeting with an Aboriginal Elder who helped set up Australia’s first Aboriginal Medical Service in Sydney’s Redfern.

“She came into TAIHS and she just broke down crying to see how far we had come. From the early days when she was trying to set up the first Aboriginal Medical Service to being at TAIHS, which is an Aboriginal and Islander service, and then to be seen by an Indigenous doctor was amazing.

“To her, that was the goal. To get to the stage where we could be looking after our own mob. That was a really special moment.”

Growing up on a farm in rural north Queensland Dr Power always wanted to work in the health field. A desire driven by the loss of her brother to cancer as a child.

“The main reason why I wanted to be involved in health was because of my brother. With everything we went through, being around doctors and the hospital, I always wanted to do something to help people. You need those motivating factors to get through medicine.”

But as a shy teenager, she lacked the confidence to aim for medicine. A problem exacerbated by a school guidance counsellor who told her she wasn’t smart enough to study physics in her final years.

It wasn’t until she read the story of the inspirational African American neurosurgeon, Ben Carson that she felt she too could try for medicine.

“He came from such a disadvantaged low socioeconomic background and showed he could get to the top. He overcame so many hardships and went on to have such a big impact. It was inspiring.”

Yet she still doubted her own ability.

“I honestly thought I couldn’t do it. I graduated from a high school in a small rural town. I think I was the first to go into medicine. It seemed like something out of reach. I was just so shy and introverted.”

Despite her misgivings, Dr Power secured a place in the JCU medicine degree in Townsville. She was attracted to the program for its focus on rural, remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. And for its proximity to home.

“I loved the fact that right from second year you went out into rural towns and learnt from doctors in those areas. They’re very inspiring people. Their level of enthusiasm and knowledge is amazing. It takes a lot to be a doctor in a rural town, so it was really inspiring for students coming through to learn in those settings.”

Dr Power believes the rural training JCU students get during their degree gives them an edge going into their intern year. The solid foundation is also highly regarded by the hospitals they go in to.

"JCU has made a name for itself because its students learn a lot of skills in their rural placements. Whereas you might not learn them if you go through some of the other medical schools. You certainly go into the intern year knowing you have a good set of skills."

Dr Power also found the support offered through the uni's Indigenous Health Unit to be valuable during her degree. But despite this, she believes indigenous students face barriers others might never be aware of. Particularly concerning family.

Many of her friends came from large families rife with poor health and high suicide rates. She saw them struggle to complete their courses while struggling with family tragedy. She also saw the impact of crippling self-doubt many Indigenous students suffer from.

But having completed medical school, her intern years and now specialist training, Dr Power would love to inspire other indigenous students.

"I would say to them to give it a go and just believe in yourself because it is very daunting. I had such low confidence, thinking I wasn't as good as everyone else. But you are. You're as good as anybody else. And medicine is attainable, it is doable.

"It's so rewarding in the end. It was hard work but for me and it seemed like something I wouldn't achieve but I did. So just give it a go, what do you have to lose?"

After two years in the hospital system, Dr Power started her specialisation through JCU GP Training, with placements in Townsville and Ingham. She has nothing but praise for the support of the Medical Educators and Supervisors through the program and is now giving back as a Cultural Mentor for current registrars.

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"Each community is very different as well, and having a cultural mentor in each of those places is definitely necessary. It creates more support for registrars."

While Dr Power is enjoying her general practice work with the Aboriginal medical service, long term she'd like to focus on preventative health with a focus on nutrition. An area she sees as key to tackling chronic disease among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"I sometimes feel like sitting at the desk and seeing people is a bit of a bandaid. I chose general practice because you are working in the community. You are seeing people and following up. I'd like to take it that step further and get involved outside the clinic as well. Work on the root causes of the problems and so much of that is good nutrition."

Ultimately Dr Power would like that to include a return to her farming roots and involve community food production. She'd like to follow a model used in the Northern Territory where communities grow their own food, providing both employment and the foundations of good health.

But for now, she delights in her general practice. In the mums she helps, the children she treats and the new lives she gets to meet.