

Where have all the GPs gone?

EDITORIAL

By **GEORGIA CAMERON,**
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MERRIWA residents have been left in the lurch for the past month with no local health practitioners in their town.

Following the departure of Dr Bronwyn Stokes – based at the Merriwa multipurpose service surgery – in October 2012, Merriwa was left with only one local GP to turn to in case of sicknesses and emergencies.

Dr Ramses Salama, at the local Merriwa surgery, was the community's only GP for four months in the permanent absence of Dr Stokes. However, at the start of February, Dr Salama fell ill and was unable to treat his patients.

Merriwa was without any professional medical help for a total of one month; patients were forced to travel long distances to seek medical help in surrounding towns like Scone and Muswellbrook.

Many parents were left questioning, "what would happen in case of an emergency?" With no medical assistance for about 70 kilometres, alarm bells were ringing for the community.

Rural Australians have higher rates of preventable diseases than people living in capital cities, with

62 per cent of rural Australians experiencing a lack of health professionals in their area.

The Australia Bureau of Statistics predicts that our country will need to produce 350 more medical graduates to meet the current demands facing rural Australia.

Merriwa's immediate community depends heavily on their local GP for everyday health assistance; with a population of 1790 people it is a necessity for the residents, young and old, to have permanent, local access to a GP.

The Merriwa district spreads beyond the town, with many country families already having to travel vast distances. The risk of accidents occurring in the outback is too high to be ignored, the distances for medical help are too far.

Long-term resident Robyn Dorney said: "The problems country doctors face are different to the experiences of city doctors".

It appears there are greater incentives for doctors to practice in non-rural areas. The conundrum facing GPs is that if they practice in a rural setting they may be overlooked for opportunities to enhance their careers in the city.

Merriwa residents are left up in arms, with no health care professionals to attend to sick patients and emergency situations. As taxpayers it is disheartening to know the government is allocating your hard-earned money to city centres when our the most basic needs are not being met in the country.



TAKING A STAND: ROAR members Isaac Austin, coach Chad Grant, and Connor Constable.
Picture: John Cronin

Real men can bear to swear

By **JOHN CRONIN** and
LACHLAN WALMSLEY

UP to 30 per cent of females experience physical or sexual abuse from men in their lifetime.

Many women don't speak up against this due to fear. Members of the Merriwa Central School ROAR academy have recently taken the White Ribbon Oath in a bid to stand up against violence towards women.

The ROAR Academy is a school-based program that fosters good values and encourages boys to become honourable young men through a combination of sports and discipline. The 30 boys that comprise ROAR, ranging from year 6 to 12, each took the oath earlier this

year and the white ribbon will now appear on the 2013 jersey as a mark of respect for the charity and its cause.

Chad Grant, Merriwa Central School ROAR coach and ambassador, said: "ROAR decided to support the White Ribbon to educate young boys the proper way to treat women in the community."

He believes this will help the members learn more respect for females and will be demonstrated in their future relationships.

Adam Johnston, founder of ROAR, said: "White Ribbon is an important initiative as violence against women is unacceptable. We are taking a stand and hope to stimulate positive actions in others."

MAC under threat due to decline

By **BETHANY EDENS-ROSA**
and **EMMA WEBSTER**

DESPITE 11 successful years in the Merriwa community, the Merriwa Activity Centre, affectionately known as MAC, is suffering from financial strain caused by lack of attendance.

Heavily relied on for the care and safety of our children, the centre is an example of the wonderful resources and opportunities that are available to the Merriwa community.

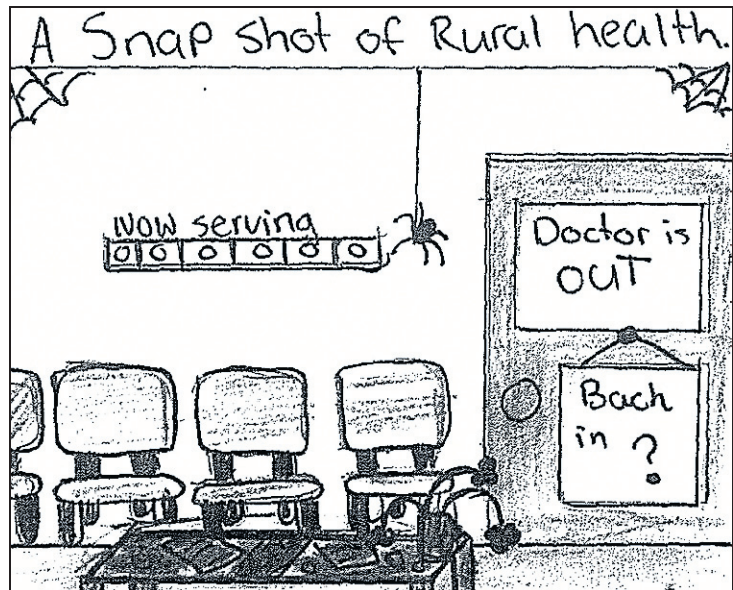
Ciara Murphy, director of MAC, believes that closure of the centre would have a devastating effect on the community.

"Many kids that come here usually don't have someone to talk to about their day, so it's good for the kids to come here and talk. They also get to do things that they wouldn't normally do at home."

The centre caters for the wider community in varying degrees. Some children attend the activity centre on a full-time basis, while others only attend on days when their parents are unable to pick them up after school, or on pupil-free days when their parents are at work.

The centre also offers an extensive timetable of activities that take place over school holidays and these often include experiences out of town.

Working parents would be largely affected by a reduction in services as many have no access to alternative childcare.



Cartoon: Emma-lee Webster

Town fleeced as sheep in socks steal show

By **LEAH WRIGHT-RILEY**
and **SKYE NICHOLLS**

MERRIWA'S Festival of the Fleeces is on again. Pencil June 7 and 8 into your diary as the festival promises to be a weekend that the whole family can enjoy.

A variety of events and exhibits are planned for the two-day festival, including a blade shearing display, working dog trial, team penning and, of course, the traditional parade featuring a herd of sheep sporting red socks.

This year will also see the return of reigning crowd favourite the ROAR Petting Zoo, which will be raising money for the Westpac Rescue Helicopter and the local Volunteer Rescue Association.

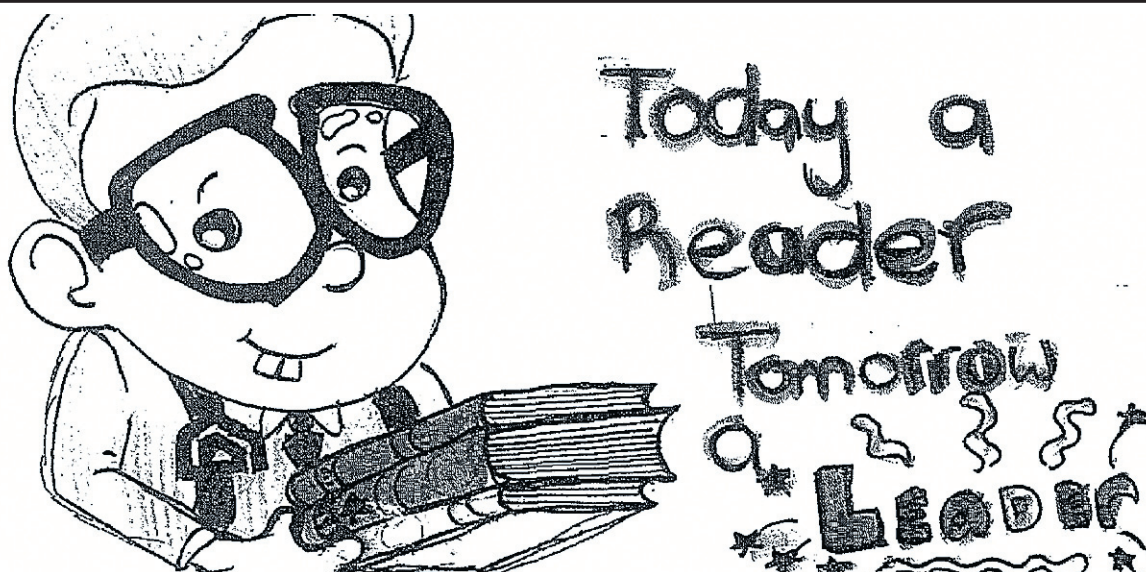
The co-ordinator of the event, Belinda McKenzie, says that visitors to the 23rd annual festival will not be disappointed.

"We are opening the celebration with a bush theme for the Friday night and this theme will feature throughout the weekend," Ms McKenzie said.



PETTING ZOO: Miriam Harrison and ROAR member Mathew Porter.
Picture: Skye Nicholls

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