

Designing practice

AMANDA LYONS

The unique atmosphere of Tasmania's Saunders Street Clinic is welcoming for staff and patients alike.



When GP Dr Jim Berryman and his wife Rebecca moved from the 'freezing cold' of Dunedin in New Zealand to Tasmania for a change of scenery in 1999, they thought they would likely stay for about a year. The couple enjoyed the lifestyle and landscape so much, however, that they never went back across the Tasman.

The Berrymans now run their own practice, the Saunders Street Clinic, in Wynyard on the north-west coast of Tasmania.

'We didn't plan to stay here, but that's the way it turned out and now we're part of the community,' Dr Berryman told *Good Practice*.

Upon starting out in Tasmania, Dr Berryman initially completed a one-year placement at the North West Regional Hospital in Burnie. After that he and Rebecca, who is an occupational therapist and rehabilitation consultant, worked in private practice for several years.

But, by 2009, Dr Berryman was chafing at the relative limitations of group practice and decided to strike out on his own with Saunders Street Clinic. He asked his wife to be practice manager – a new role for her – and they began a new challenge together.

'We'd never run our own business before. We had always been partners with someone else,' Dr Berryman explained. 'We had a pretty steep learning curve, but it was very good. We could do everything from scratch and I think we made the right decisions in the end.'

A different approach

For the Berrymans, one of the major appeals of running their own practice was the chance to do things their own way, such as closing for 90 minutes over lunchtime. Although this actually began as something of a necessity.

'When we started, I was the only doctor,' Dr Berryman said. 'And [we had] one enrolled nurse and a receptionist, so the only way you could get a break was to close the doors and put a sign up.'

This was a big departure from previous practices in which Dr Berryman had worked, where there was 'always someone coming down the corridor'. He believes the idea of taking a break during the day has been a key factor in preventing doctor burnout and maintaining staff morale at the clinic, particularly as staff numbers increased.

'It grew into a really great team-building exercise and a bit of debriefing time for the clinic,' Dr Berryman said. 'Instead of having formal meetings, we get together for lunch.'

The tight-knit practice team now consists of five GPs, five administrative staff members and three practice nurses.

'There is a good community feel about the practice,' Dr Berryman said. 'It's small and friendly, we all know each other and there's no staff turnover, apart from registrars coming and going.'

'The same staff have been with us for the last seven years, which is great. It feels like an extended family.'

Up-to-date technology has always been an important aspect of the Berrymans' practice.

'We were able to research and get all of the technology that I'd previously wanted in other practices,' Dr Berryman said. 'It meant we had to spend more money to start with, but at the end of the day it's all good-quality equipment and it helps.'

This technology includes telehealth and remote conferencing equipment.

“We've had people visit the practice ... and say they have never seen anything quite like it”

'We've got telehealth with a number of specialists in different fields, like psychiatry and dermatology,' Dr Berryman said.

'It's good for local patients who would otherwise have to travel to Hobart, or sometimes to Melbourne or Sydney. They can just come here, sit in a room and talk to a specialist.'

Saunders Street Clinic also features a dedicated room for students and registrars.

'We've got some conferencing facilities in our teaching room, as well,' Dr Berryman said. 'It's got a big library and a short throw projector, and we can hook in with events happening in other parts of Australia, which we quite often do.'



This page: Dr Jim Berryman and his wife Rebecca used atypical décor and design elements to make Saunders Street Clinic a welcoming space for patients and staff alike. **Opposite:** Recruitment and retention has always been a focus at the clinic, which has never had to advertise for staff members.



By design

Another distinctive aspect of Saunders Street Clinic is its décor, which is somewhat unique for a general practice. When they purchased the building – a former residential bungalow – the Berrymans were determined to make the practice different from others they had experienced.

‘Most people don’t want to go to the doctor in the first place, and if you go into a practice that’s sterile and white with very uncomfortable chairs, that’s another reason people won’t want to visit,’ Dr Berryman said. ‘So we thought we’d make it appealing and comfortable.’

Rebecca, who has a talent for design, turned her hand to making this idea a reality – despite some opposition.

‘We were away on holiday and the painters kept phoning to say they thought the colour scheme was too dull,’ Dr Berryman explained. ‘But Rebecca stuck to her guns and when we got back it looked really fantastic.’

Taking inspiration from experiences as exotic as their travels in Europe, and as homely as a pub in Hobart, Rebecca put

together an eclectic, cosy interior. The Berrymans also considered comfort from every aspect of the building, inside and out.

‘We particularly wanted to ensure that every room would have windows looking outside, as opposed to the windowless rooms that some clinics have,’ Dr Berryman said. ‘And we planted the gardens, with trees, outside each room.’

‘The waiting room is like a lounge; we’ve got open fires and a coffee machine.’

These efforts with the practice design have led to positive feedback from a range of visitors.

‘We’ve had people visit from Sydney or Melbourne or overseas and say they’ve never come across a place quite like it,’ Dr Berryman said.

The design is representative of the intent that has informed all aspects of Saunders Street Clinic: to make it an enjoyable place for patients and staff alike.

The result has been beneficial in terms of patient visits – the Berrymans are considering expanding the building in order to increase its capacity – and also for staff recruitment and retention.



‘We’ve never had to advertise for any staff since we started the business, which is great for us,’ Dr Berryman said. ‘Medical staff all come through the local training program, including people like Dr Chris Hughes [RACGP 2016 Registrar of the Year], who has stayed on as a Fellow and become a co-supervisor.’

‘Next year we’re taking on some registrars who were students here. We’re now seeing them return and hopefully they’ll stay on once they get their Fellowship.’

‘One of the aims is to try and get people to like general practice and to come back, and I think we’re achieving that.’ 📧