

Reception for the Reunion of Pre-Cyclone Tracy  
Staff of Old Darwin Hospital  
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC  
Administrator of the Northern Territory  
Government House –10 June 2009

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Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Government House. I acknowledge the Larrakia people and their ancestors, traditional owners of the land on which this house stands.

This special occasion marks the fulfilment of years of discussion and months of organisation – well done to the Committee. It presents the opportunity to welcome many of you back to a city you may not have seen for forty years or more. A city that progresses in leaps and bounds as oil, gas and livestock are exported from our shores; a city of marinas, markets, towering apartments, a new port and Convention Centre.

However, I know that our Darwin long-time residents will reassure you that beneath the superficial changes, this is a community which

continues to “have a heart”. And we hold very close to our hearts all those of you who have contributed to the welfare of the Northern Territory, who have worked in the medical field, in whatever capacity. May I mention especially, and welcome, Anne Walker as I know we all remember and respect Alan Walker’s great contribution.

This reunion presents a wealth of personal stories and memories. Wonderful anecdotes tinged with that black humour that comes from dealing with matters of life, and death. But as Administrator of the Northern Territory, this is my opportunity to look at a much bigger picture as the history of the hospital also traces the history of our city.

I could not begin this without mentioning Matron Brennan, who supervised so ruthlessly the moral virtue of the nurses. I could go on .... but I won’t – to history then. The first hospital opened 135 years ago in Packard Street above Doctor’s Gully under the authority of Dr James Stokes Millner,

with a British matron and her husband as the only staff and water brought up from the well in the gully below.

By the 1930s, the daily average of inpatients had reached forty and plans were made for the Kahlin site. By comparison, the daily average of inpatients in 2009 is 360, with additional 150-190 presentations to the Royal Darwin Hospital Emergency Department daily.

The first two nursing assistants trained for the Kahlin Beach Clinic were Daisy Ruddick and Hilda Muir who both became highly respected Darwin matriarchs. The 98-bed complex was occupied only a few weeks before the bombing of Darwin in 1942.

As Darwin recovered post war, the hospital became an integral part of the community. Prejudices gradually fell away and the citizens of the north became this thriving multicultural society. Indeed, it was during this period that the

dearly loved Eddie Quong, an Australian-born Chinese, was appointed Chairman of the Board. The hospital was extended in 1967, to include a new ward, intensive care, and a nurses' home, complete with swimming pool. I wonder if any of you here today responded to the inviting "Train at the Top End" guide to a nursing career in the north, published that year, which extolled: *The student nurse has the opportunity to gain experience in nursing tropical ailments and to work in a modern hospital environment.*

It went on to more important issues: *A good supply of casual dresses is 'a must' for the nurse in Darwin. Bring a ball dress if you like ...nurses in Darwin need never have a dull moment when off duty! Normal hours: 80 per fortnight, board and lodging \$14.40 per fortnight.*

My wife Tessa, née Wilkinson, and Carole Mansfield, née Lehman, were encouraged by Barbara Pottle to come in 1970 on a one year contract – that has extended to nearly thirty-nine

years in the Territory. They had all trained together at St Martin's Hospital in Brisbane.

The reality was that Darwin Hospital was the largest hospital in Australia under the control of the Commonwealth Department of Health. It grew to a bed capacity of 340, with twenty doctors. The staff suffered from isolation and a lack of the things they had taken for granted elsewhere, such as fresh fruit and vegetables. There was no such thing as a hospital dietician and in July 1967 this led to a complaint from nursing staff: *patients on full and light diets receive roast beef. The only compromise for a light diet being mashed potatoes instead of baked!*

Before moving further on in history, I should mention the legendary home 3 parties. They were certainly wonderful events and the floorboards jumped to the music.

And so we came to December 1974 and Cyclone Tracy: as the winds rose, windows were taped and patients moved to protected areas or under

the beds. Miraculously the prefab wards survived and there was even a baby born in the eye of the storm. But the three-storey brick ward near the foreshore was seriously damaged, the X-ray department was unroofed and wards flooded. Sadly, the anaesthetist was killed in his home.

Alan Bromwich summarised *In general our simple but flexible plan worked extremely well. First class leaders emerged ... I do consider that the hospital and its staff rose to the occasion. I doubt if any other institution could have done so well.*

Six months before a new \$100 million dollar hospital was opened by Prime Minister The Honourable Malcolm Fraser at Casuarina, in September 1980, the NT News wrote of its predecessor: *No building in Darwin can match the colourful history of Darwin Hospital. That it survived those early years is a tribute to the dedicated staff who stuck to the job stoically and refused to give up despite appallingly primitive conditions and long working hours.*

Sister Ellen Kettle who pioneered mobile health work in isolated areas of the Northern Territory wrote of her belief that: *bricks and mortar or even aeroplanes do not make a health service; it is the quality, not quantity of the personnel staffing the services which makes all the difference between success and failure.*

It will be interesting to see whether close ties continue amongst current generations of medical staff, one of whom is my daughter Zoe. I hope that this reunion proves a special time for old friends, including, I note, retired surgeon Mr Arun Mahajani whose 80<sup>th</sup> birthday is today – happy birthday Mr Mahajani.

As the organisers noted in their letter to my office about this event - there are many wonderful stories to tell and *there is actually not one person attending who hasn't contributed.* It is therefore my pleasure, on behalf of the Northern Territory to thank you all. And I would like to suggest that before each of you returns home, you write just

one story and pass it to the organisers entitled “I remember when”. What an outstanding tribute such a collection would make to all of you who displayed spirit, commitment and a sense of adventure - who came, saw and conquered.

This occasion allows “us”, and I include myself in that “us”, to crack a smile, to share a laugh and to enjoy again the great times we had then, in an age before television, e-mail, DVDs and processed entertainment. We were the entertainment then and didn't we do it well.

I would now like to introduce someone whose personal history is also intertwined with Darwin. Margaret Lyons was born in the hospital above Doctors Gully. Her father, John, was a prominent barrister and her husband Bill Doherty's career in education spanned forty six years, many of them in the Northern Territory. Margaret herself was awarded a Public Service Medal in 1994 and her nursing career included service at Old Darwin Hospital, ten years as the Aerial Medical Nurse in

the Top End and, finally, the position of Principal Nursing Officer. Welcome back Margaret .....