

HEALTH

A fair dinkum country practice

Dr Peter Stevens, a medic from the tiny rural town of Heyfield, with a population of about 1300, received an OAM in this year's Queen's birthday honours list for services to rural medicine in his dual role as doctor and educator.

Having taken up medicine in 1972, Dr Stevens says being able to empower others as an educator has now become his main focus.

Practice principal and key supervisor (educator) of the Heyfield Medical Centre, he employs three full-time doctors and a team of interns, registrars and medical students.

The surgery services an acute bush nursing hospital, as well as a 60-bed hostel and nursing home that sits in front of it.

Dr Stevens joined the practice, about 200 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, in 1989 before taking it over. "The previous owner, Dr John Graves, was a much-loved character," he says. "He usually worked alone and was on call seven days a week."

Working in a rural community, in timber and dairy territory, has become a way of life for Dr Stevens and his family. "I wouldn't work anywhere else," he says. "I love living in a small community where it's relatively transparent and easy to see the elements it creates that values more what people do, rather than who they are."

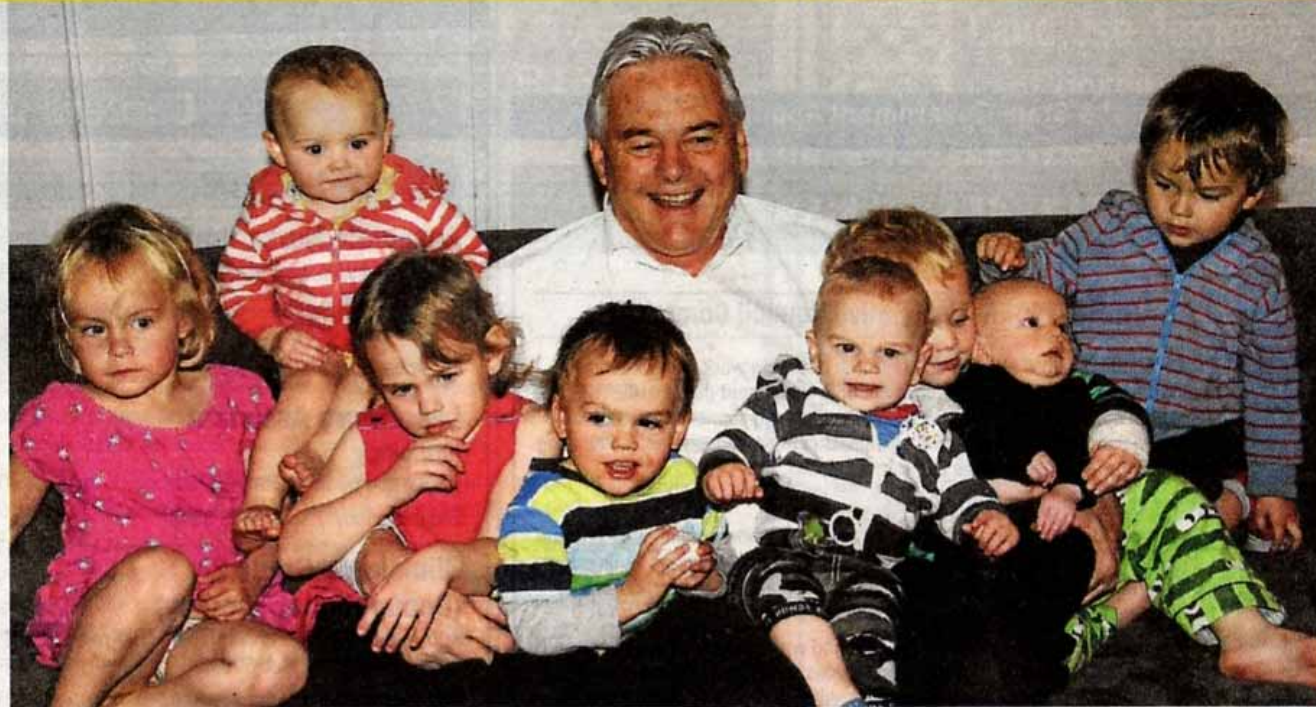
"Plus, the scope of a country practice is always interesting."

Dr Stevens attributes the support of his wife of 37 years, Helen, and a happy family life as key contributors. "I think long-term relationships are grossly underrated these days," he says.

The couple have four children. "Sarah, a doctor, is very keen to be a GP like her old man and Andrew, the youngest, is a builder," Dr Stevens says proudly.

Their other daughter, Emma, is a teacher and son Mark is a builder and property developer who played AFL with North Melbourne and the Adelaide Crows for 12 years.

"All four are married with a total



Happy ... Dr Peter Stevens, here with his grandchildren, loves the feel of a rural community.

of eight children between them [except for Emma] ... the oldest is four, with a six-month gap in-between, which makes for pandemonium when we all get together," he laughs.

All have also lived the city life and travelled broadly within Australia and overseas for extended periods. "But once they started having children, they moved back into our community to live, so we see them all often."

Keeping it a close and loving family, Dr Stevens' parents, Ed, 86, and Pat, 82, live in the local aged-care home. "They have been there for the past 18 months," he says.

Doing his part to encourage more doctors to come and practise in rural Victoria, Dr Stevens employs graduate students to give them an opportunity to make a judgment about rural living and

general practice based on all their own experiences.

"We need more tertiary-trained professionals to live and work in rural settings," he says.

"It's a great privilege to be a registered medical practitioner in Australia – and with any privilege comes the balancing of responsibility ... the key responsibility being to ensure that we, as a profession, provide equality of service provision to all communities."

YVONNE NICOLAS

LINKS

getGP.net.au; agpt.com.au

MyCareer
.com.au

More health jobs at
mycareer.com.au/health.

THE FACTS

SALARY: A doctor in rural Australia can earn up to \$250,000-plus.

HOURS: "We are new-age doctors and we work four-day weeks – plus also being on call one in four days," says Dr Peter Stevens.

ADVICE FOR SIMILAR CAREER PATHS: Rural general practice provides the capacity for medics to engage in almost any area of medicine depending on interests and location. Regional general practice training programs are arranged and funded to provide doctors with the opportunity to learn their craft in a supportive environment – with a very broad scope for extended and procedural skills training.