



A profession keeping you on your toes: Meet our podiatrist in the tropics, Leigh Townsville

In starting his career journey, Leigh initially trained as an exercise physiologist, working in a palliative care unit and engaging in research projects. Interestingly, his brother and wife are both podiatrists (and Leigh remembered believing the profession wouldn't be a match for him!). But it was during his time in palliative care that he gained experience in wound treatment and care.

“You can literally improve people's quality of life,” says Leigh. “I was good at it and chose to specialise, transferring these skills to podiatry. My background in exercise physiology gives me an added perspective in understanding of the foot in relation to the body.”

As a podiatrist, Leigh has a wide and varied caseload. He is responsible for general nail care, more intense care for disability clients, wound treatment, biomechanical assessments, neurovascular assessments, and more. For patients who need additional care, for example, those with nerve and blood supply issues, he will refer them to GPs and specialists.

“It was my goal to work for a not-for-profit organisation or in the public health system. I believe healthcare should be accessible for everyone, not just those who can afford it. When I saw a role with NWRH, I knew I'd flourish in this type of environment over a hospital in a metro area. In this role I have the opportunity to treat a full spectrum of cases.”

Building relationships with clients

Leigh travels to a number of different areas every week, including Burdekin, Bowen, Collinsville, and Charters Towers. He then returns to Townsville for the weekend. Interestingly, each town has its own unique presentations; the slight variations in climates between towns only 150-200 kilometres apart influences foot health and conditions!

“Some clients live on farms and large properties, and these environments present a certain set of interesting challenges. What I find most rewarding is, after visiting clients in pain and treating them for fifteen minutes, they can walk away pain-free. I love building relationships with clients. I’ll typically see a patient every 8-12 weeks; they come in with big smiles to tell me all about their lives and families.”

It can be challenging for Leigh seeing some clients living remotely who lack communication and support networks; particularly sheltered clients who haven’t re-entered the community since the COVID-19 outbreak. But it’s also rewarding.

“It’s special for me to be part of their day, talk to them and make them happy. You’re able to change their lives for the better. I was introduced to one elderly client who was told their wounds would never heal. I love a challenge and took it upon myself to get them better results. I saw them every week for three months, often on lunch breaks because I had a packed caseload. Within three months, their wounds had healed. It was such a success story for someone over 75 and now they experience a much better quality of life.”

Friendships with other clinicians

At NWRH, clinicians often travel together. Leigh travels with an exercise physiologist and a physiotherapist.

“Moving here from Melbourne, it’s been great being able to form these relationships. You definitely develop familial bonds with colleagues, living and working together in such close proximity. We can discuss what’s going on in our work and piece client stories together for a more holistic view of their health. This ensures we can provide the best possible care through a multidisciplinary approach. NWRH has a great family feel.”

In the wider organisation, NWRH has a strong mix of junior and senior clinicians.

“People here are switched on and open to discussion. You can bounce ideas off one another. The multidisciplinary approach works well, as we can share knowledge and it makes providing healthcare easier and much more successful.”

Life in Townsville

Leigh joined NWRH from Melbourne, where his family still lives. During his first year at NWRH, he travelled home for birthdays and holidays.

“We even had a holiday in Hamilton Island, close to the communities where I work. But during COVID-19 travel restrictions, it was tough not being able to see them in person, even while staying connected digitally. Funnily enough though, moving a way has brought us closer in a sense. You really realise how much you love and care for each other, and keep in touch more regularly.”

Leigh is currently completing a Masters of Public Health in Tropical Medicine. NWRH accommodates his study schedule and provides the rural and remote work required for him to receive the funding to undertake this study.

“I love individual care and developing my skills in outreach. I still have so much more to give. It would be wonderful to one day create programs to provide better health outcomes for the Australian population. NWRH is the perfect place to lay a foundation of knowledge and see patients across so many areas. You can really make a difference.”

Outside of work, Leigh sets a positive example for his clients by living a healthy active lifestyle. He is part of a triathlon club, surf lifesaving club and swimming club.

“If you’re thinking about joining NWRH and working in remote health, don’t think about it too much. Just do it! You’ll join a warm, supportive culture with a family feel. Everyone is here to look after one another.”