

Laverton provide general-practice surgeries of a more familiar type; children with respiratory infections, antenatal checks, and minor trauma. Even here, however, the unusual cannot be ruled out. At the end of one surgery there emerged from the bush a French concert pianist who, it transpired, had been indulging his passion for collecting large lizards when he sustained a nasty bite on his hand from a 5-foot specimen who valued his freedom. Shades of: "Will I play the piano again, doc?" He will, although I did advise him to wear gloves or switch to butterflies.

In Western Australia there is sometimes no alternative but to drive long distances on poor roads. Sadly, some people attempt to make such journeys too fast, or when they are too tired or too drunk, or a combination of all three. This fact and the appearance of the ubiquitous kangaroo on the roads at night leads to an extraordinary number of single-vehicle accidents and a depressing and seemingly unending stream of moribund victims to be flown to Perth.

Aborigine country

The longest routine trip is a two-day tour of Aborigine camps in the Central Desert, undertaken fortnightly. Here, some of the last tribal groups try to maintain their old way of life in the face of the steady disintegration caused by the advent of the white man. They care nothing for personal possessions, yours or theirs, and lead a simple nomadic life, requiring only food, water, and shade. They can, by turns, be delightful and infuriating, the elders tending to be proud and dignified, while in some of the younger men dignity increasingly gives way to drunkenness. The arrival in camp of a car loaded with alcohol, or a bout of petrol-sniffing by some of the young men, is frequently the trigger for violence. Fortunately, however, natural selection seems to have given the Aborigine an incredibly sturdy skull, and spear wounds in the thigh, while they invariably become infected, drain well and usually heal without problems. In the desert all cuts become infected and all infected cuts seem to give rise to cellulitis. Trauma apart, the main adult health problems are venereal disease—which is common—and trachoma—which is endemic.

The children are as beautiful as their problems are multiple. They have fair hair and the longest eyelashes I've ever seen, but have to contend with nits, scabies, gastroenteritis, recurrent chest infections, chronic purulent ear infections with perforated

ear drums, and again trachoma. Despite this formidable array of maladies, somewhere along the line they grow up into strapping adults. For reasons beyond me the chronic ear infections seem to cease at puberty and, although I am assured that they have permanent hearing defects, they always detect the approach of a vehicle five minutes before I do.

Aborigines are by nature shy and reluctant to be examined too thoroughly. Even if they speak English they are unimpressed by doctors who ask too many questions, feeling that a doctor should know intuitively what the problem is. Clinics take place in derelict caravans or wherever there is some shade; it is not unknown for the local medicine man to hold a clinic alongside, and for patients to be referred in both directions. After the clinic one requires a lift back by car to the plane. It is always a bad sign if the car stops yards away, as this indicates total absence of brakes. After climbing in through the windows of one such vehicle we travelled a mile only to have the disconcerting spectacle of being overtaken by the rear wheel. The remaining distance to the plane was covered on foot in a temperature of 49°C.

Warburton, 600 miles from Kalgoorlie, is the most isolated settlement in Australia, but after two days' touring the camps amid the heat and dust of the desert it is an oasis where one may imbibe quantities of cold drinks proffered by the three nursing sisters there. These girls maintain their sanity and equanimity despite their isolation and the occasional violence; they are able to deal with the medical problems, but powerless in the face of the major malady—the disintegration of Aboriginal society.

Once upon a time to the Aborigine his life, his land, and his religion were all one, bound together by the legends of his dreamtime ancestors. He has had his religion undermined and seen his land taken over—only to find that those responsible have no remedy for the ensuing loss of purpose and self-esteem, beyond offering financial benefits for which he has little need and no use. The Whitlam government built a modern hospital at Warburton. It stands unused, in the middle of the desert, a huge monument to our inability to see the problems of another race in any terms but our own. People occasionally throw stones at it.

The children stand, barefoot and unconcerned, on petrol drums hot enough to fry an egg, to wave goodbye to "Doctor Plane." As the engines start they are enveloped in a cloud of red dust. One can only hope that they don't grow up to find their heritage has been entirely relegated to bookshelves and museums.

Instructions to authors

The following are the minimum requirements for manuscripts submitted for publication.

A stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon *must* accompany the manuscript if acknowledgment of its receipt is desired.

(1) **Typing** should be on one side of the paper, with double or triple spacing between the lines and 5-cm margins at the top and left-hand side of the sheet.

(2) **Three copies** should be submitted.

(3) **Spelling** should conform to that of *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*.

(4) **References** must be in the Vancouver style (*BMJ*, 24 February 1979, p 532) and their accuracy checked before submission.

(5) **SI units** are used for scientific measurements. In the text they should be followed by traditional units in

parentheses. In tables and illustrations values are given only in SI units, but a conversion factor must be supplied. For general guidance on the International System of Units, and some useful conversion factors, see *The SI for the Health Professions* (WHO, 1977).

(6) **Authors** should give their names and initials, their current appointments, and not more than two degrees or diplomas. Each author must sign the covering letter as evidence of consent to publication.

(7) **Letters to the Editor** submitted for publication must be signed personally by all the authors.

(8) **Acknowledgments** will *not* be sent unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.

(9) **Detailed instructions** are given in the *BMJ* dated 5 January 1980 (p 6).