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Australia's top health workers win national honour

A GP who helped to transform healthcare for mentally ill Australians, a team helping remote patients with end stage renal failure and young leader who set up an Aboriginal health service have taken top honours in the HESTA Primary Health Care Awards.

The HESTA Primary Health Care Award winners were announced at a gala event in Melbourne as part of the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) National Forum.

Individual Distinction winner: Regional Victorian GP Julie Thompson.

Dr Thompson's influence in reforming mental health services and cancer care services has brought about lasting changes for the benefit of patients.

A key reform driven by Dr Thompson was creating Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items for mental health and education programs, which changed the way GPs supported patients with mental illness.

The MBS changes brought about greater support for GPs working with people with a mental illness, giving GPs access to more services and more comprehensive care rather than expecting an ill patient to navigate services.

The Warragul GP's innovative approaches to primary health care have also been realised through her work with the National Breast Cancer Centre. Dr Thompson has developed resources to help GPs improve follow-up care for patients with breast cancer, and issued best practice guidelines in early detection and management of breast and ovarian cancer to GPs and the community.

Dr Thompson's own personal journey with breast cancer 12 years ago influenced her drive to create educational opportunities for GPs, knowing the significance of early detection and its impact on women's survival rates.

Team Excellence winner: Western Desert Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku (WDNWPT) which runs Purple House in Alice Springs.

Purple House is a base for patients from remote communities living with kidney disease. It offers a GP clinic with Indigenous trainees, registered nurses, social support workers, a podiatrist, exercise physiologist, Chinese medicine, bush medicine, Ngangkari traditional healers and a dialysis nurse.

As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service, Purple House is run by a board of directors who are dialysis patients, or the family of dialysis patients. Services are provided to patients and their families in four locations, and the team is liaising with communities in the NT, WA and SA to share in the model.

The aim of Purple House is to keep people who are in end stage renal failure connected with their community while receiving care, and to get the very best quality of life both in Alice Springs and in the bush.

Young Leader winner: Jonathan Ford from the Rockingham Kwinana Division of General Practice, WA.

Mr Ford's work in setting up the Aboriginal Health and Wellness centre Moorditj Koort or 'good heart' in Noongar language highlighted his leadership skills for this award.

After growing up in a community with inadequate services, Mr Ford was determined to make changes, which evolved through Moorditj Koort where a variety of health services are provided under one roof, in a place run by trusted locals.

Moorditj Koort services include chronic disease management, maternal group practice, school based health clinics, asthma and diabetes education and dentistry. It also offers access to psychologists and addiction counselling and management.

HESTA CEO Anne-Marie Corboy congratulated the three winners.

“The HESTA Primary Health Care Awards recognise frontline health workers helping their communities battle cancer, chronic disease, mental illness and injury. They are an opportunity to celebrate three outstanding contributions and to reflect on the amazing job done every day in primary health,” Ms Corboy said.

AGPN CEO Leanne Wells said this inaugural award has revamped the significance of primary health care across the nation.

“These awards help to celebrate excellence in the health care industry and also remind the broader community that health care in the primary sector is making a difference every day, through individuals and teams of people striving to deliver better health outcomes,” Ms Wells said.

Each winner received \$5,000 in an ME Bank Online Savings Account and \$5,000 towards further education or implementation of their program or initiative.

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Photographs are available on request.