



Update on the implementation of OHO recommendations: An outcome report on improvement actions taken in Doomadgee April 2023 - December 2024.

Doomadgee – Update on implementation of OHO recommendations

This report highlights the outcomes of improvement actions taken at Doomadgee Rural Hospital and Gidgee Healing, 18 months after recommendations were made by the Office of the Health Ombudsman (OHO).

Both health services have invested significantly to attract and retain clinical staff through improved training and orientation, accommodation, and policies and procedures.

The engagement of an Indigenous Liaison Officer, increased education and engagement with the community, families and individuals diagnosed with Acute Rheumatic Fever/ Rheumatic Heart Disease, and weekly case conferencing between the health services has achieved an almost 100% compliance rate with treatment plans.

Collaboration between service providers continues to be an area of focus, and fragmentation of care remains an issue in health service delivery in Doomadgee.

The health services have advised of their commitment to continue to strengthen relationships and build trust with the Doomadgee community through meaningful engagement and involving the community in the design and delivery of culturally appropriate healthcare. The OHO will continue to engage with both services and receive feedback from the community through ongoing stakeholder engagement on the provision of health services in the region.

This document contains references to deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In accordance with cultural respect and sensitivity, we acknowledge that their names and identities are mentioned here with the utmost care. We recognise the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their land, culture, and heritage. We extend our respect to their families, communities, and Elders, both past and present.

Background

Doomadgee is a remote town located in the far north-western corner of Queensland, around 432 kilometers by road from Mount Isa. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates the resident population at 1,461 (2023), comprised of 89.3% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.¹

Doomadgee Rural Hospital, a Queensland Health facility within the North West Hospital and Health Service (NWHHS), is a Level 2 remote hospital under the Rural and Remote Clinical Services Capability Framework. On 8 July 2021, the Office of the Health Ombudsman (OHO) received a complaint about the health services provided by Doomadgee Rural Hospital, specifically in relation to the passing of Miss Sandy on 30 May 2020, as well as concerns about the broader impact on

¹ Doomadgee | Region summary | Data by region | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au)





the Doomadgee community. Miss Sandy was an Aboriginal woman who resided at Doomadgee and was diagnosed with Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD) as a child.

RHD is a disease of the heart, involving damage to the valves, caused by Acute Rheumatic Fever (ARF) and is a prevalent health issue for the Aboriginal community in Doomadgee. ARF is an illness caused by an autoimmune response to group A streptococcal bacterial infection, otherwise known as strep A infection.

Gidgee Healing is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service funded by both state and federal governments which provides primary health care services to the community of Doomadgee. Between September 2021 and March 2022, the OHO received several complaints regarding the provision of primary health services to the Doomadgee community by Gidgee Healing.

What we investigated

The OHO commenced investigations into both Gidgee Healing and Doomadgee Rural Hospital to identify possible systemic deficiencies in the systems and processes in place at the health services relating to the following themes:

- Governance, including policies and procedures and clinical incident management
- Staffing and training, including cultural awareness and cultural considerations
- Communication and engagement
- Provision of care

In July 2022, the Office of the Northern Coroner began an inquest into the passing of Miss Sandy, as well as two additional women from Doomadgee - Betty who passed away on 23 September 2023 and Kaya, who passed away on 30 May 2020, both due to RHD complications.

In May 2023, the OHO completed the investigations and published the findings for both health service providers with recommendations to implement to improve the safety and quality of healthcare services.²

The findings of the Coroner's inquest were delivered on 30 June 2023 and included recommendations for both NWHHS and Gidgee Healing.

Recommendations

The OHO investigations identified opportunities for improvement and made recommendations relating to:

- Increasing staff awareness and knowledge of chronic disease of particular relevance to the Doomadgee community, including ARF and RHD.
- Providing staff access to tools to assist in the detection of ARF/RHD.
- Improving ARF/RHD screening programs and ongoing management of patients through implementing a local coordinator for screening events, community engagement, coordination of care, education for patients and families, and notification to the RHD registry.

² Investigation reports into Doomadgee Rural Hospital and Gidgee Healing [Systemic investigation - Office of the Health Ombudsman \(oho.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.oho.qld.gov.au/systemic-investigation-office-of-the-health-ombudsman)





- Developing staff capability to provide a culturally safe and responsive practice through the development and implementation of mandatory orientation packages that are informed by engaging with the local community and incorporate local values and beliefs, and highlight the needs of the community.
- Improving patient information systems and staff knowledge of how to access and use various record systems.
- Doomadgee Rural Hospital and Gidgee Healing working together to develop a partnership agreement to improve communication, collaborative care for patients, sharing information where consent is provided, and determine the responsibilities and expected outcomes for each service incorporating consultation from the community.
- Developing a sustainable workforce, prioritising recruitment and development of a local workforce where possible.
- Reviewing the accessibility of each service and strategies employed to ensure the community is informed of important information including service closures.
- Ensuring staff are aware of, through mandatory training, and adhere to, local practices relating to Sad News and Sorry Business.

The Health Ombudsman made 12 recommendations for improvement relating to Doomadgee Rural Hospital and nine recommendations relating to Gidgee Healing.

Implementation progress

After making recommendations the Health Ombudsman monitors the implementation of recommendations through ongoing engagement and the provision of reports and supporting evidence demonstrating progress made by the health service. Following receipt of a report and supporting evidence, the OHO conducts an assessment and reports the status of the recommendations to the health service. Where recommendations have not yet been satisfied, further reporting and evidence by the health service to the Health Ombudsman is required.

Gidgee Healing and NWHHS each provided initial progress reports in late 2023, detailing progress made in implementing the recommendations. Following analysis of the reports and supporting evidence, the majority of recommendations were noted as being in progress by each health service and further reporting was warranted.

In recognising the significant work being undertaken by the health services and the administrative burden of regular reports and the provision of evidence to both the OHO and the Coroner, the Health Ombudsman, in consultation with both NWHHS and Gidgee Healing, suggested for the second report, a mixed method of assessment, incorporating a combination of documentary evidence with a site visit to view improvements and obtain feedback directly, rather than a written response to address all elements of the recommendations.

Documentary evidence was provided by NWHHS and Gidgee Healing on 28 March 2024. In August 2024, senior staff from the OHO travelled to Mount Isa and Doomadgee to meet with health service executives, staff, members of the Doomadgee community and representatives of the Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council to view, assess and receive feedback on improvements that have been implemented by both Gidgee Healing and Doomadgee Rural Hospital.





Engagement visit to Doomadgee

Staff from the OHO spent two days in Mount Isa, 19 August 2024 and 20 August 2024, to meet with executives and key staff from NWHHS and Gidgee Healing. A joint meeting was held with the OHO, NWHHS and Gidgee Healing to discuss improvements in collaboration between the services and the provision of healthcare services in Doomadgee.

NWHHS provided evidence of staff training including cultural capability training, and how the service is measuring the effectiveness of this through community feedback. To strengthen the service's ability to meet the needs of the Doomadgee community, NWHHS has an Aboriginal community member or staff member on all recruitment selection panels, actively seeks and responds to feedback from the community and the Health Council in implementing improvements to the facility and service. NWHHS discussed improvements including appointing an Indigenous Liaison Officer for RHD, dedicating a room at the hospital as a healthy hearts room to provide patients with a private space with additional comforts to assist with the administration of ARF/RHD treatments, and changes to the hospital to make it a more welcoming space for the community.

Gidgee Healing demonstrated their ability to track and follow up on patients diagnosed with chronic health conditions and explained the transition to a new practice software platform and the benefits realised. Staffing at Gidgee Healing had stabilised with training programs in place, however there were noted challenges in sourcing staff to work in a remote region and for staff to attend face to face training with organisations often unwilling to send a trainer to Doomadgee. The formation of community advisory groups for chronic disease and health issues of relevance to Doomadgee were highlighted as part of their community engagement framework. Infrastructure such as internet connectivity and the ability to access patient information from other service providers were raised as limitations experienced by Gidgee Healing.

In the joint meeting, both NWHHS and Gidgee Healing acknowledged the barriers that hindered communication and collaboration in the past and reiterated their joint commitment to cooperating and strengthening services for the Doomadgee community. Gidgee Healing discussed rebuilding permanency following recent staffing changes and both parties recognised the importance of building trust with the community together.

The complexities of remote health care, the need for visiting specialist services, both public and private, and decision making to address critical gaps in service provision without consultation leads to further fragmentation of healthcare services, highlighting the importance of collaboration between NWHHS and Gidgee Healing.

New pathways of partnership were explored for community engagement, sharing resources, and improving collaborative care for shared patients.

OHO staff spent two days in Doomadgee, 21 August 2024 and 22 August 2024, to meet with the Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council and community members to gather feedback regarding healthcare services provided by Doomadgee Rural Hospital and Gidgee Healing. Staff from the OHO visited Gidgee Healing and Doomadgee Rural Hospital to meet with staff, obtain their feedback and experience regarding changes implemented, and view improvements first hand.

Visiting Doomadgee Rural Hospital provided OHO staff the opportunity to view the availability of resources including clinical pathway for suspected ARF, tour the healthy hearts room (a private space equipped with distractions patients can tailor to their preference), view the improvements to





the entrance and waiting area to make it more welcoming for the community, and gain knowledge of how they had improved compliance rates for ARF/RHD treatment injections to almost 100% for registered patients, with appropriate follow up plans in place for the outlying patients. Recruitment and retention of staff in a remote area was highlighted as an ongoing issue noting the increased costs staff bear including living costs, travel to see family, and limitations on accessing training. While the majority of staff are not local and have temporarily relocated away from family connections, they expressed their passion for the community and shared concern about what happens when they leave, as in time natural attrition will occur. Staff raised that doing more for the mental health and wellbeing of staff should be a priority to help improve staff retention rates.

The OHO staff visited Gidgee Healing and met with staff who explained how they collaborate with colleagues at Doomadgee Rural Hospital, escalate and resolve issues at a service level, and access vital information from Queensland Health and the RHD Register. Gidgee Healing talked through their communication channels to ensure the community are kept up to date regarding service delivery, and how they are working towards improving patient health literacy. Staff at Gidgee Healing explained the difficulties experienced to recruit and maintain sustainable staffing. It was clear staff were passionate about delivering quality healthcare services for the community and hold concerns about what happens when the current staff go.

Further monitoring

The Health Ombudsman acknowledges the efforts made by NWHHS, Doomadgee Rural Hospital and Gidgee Healing to implement recommendations made in 2023, and commend the services on the improvements completed, and in progress, to achieve improved health outcomes for the Doomadgee community, in particular those diagnosed with RHD.

Following review of the report and documents provided in March 2024 and further information gathered during the follow up visit to Doomadgee in August 2024, the Health Ombudsman decided in October 2024 that formal monitoring of the majority of recommendations was no longer required, noting the commitment of both services to continue to progress the improvement actions that have been taken.

The Health Ombudsman commends NWHHS, Doomadgee Rural Hospital and Gidgee Healing on the service improvement actions taken and the progress that has been made since the recommendations were made in 2023. The OHO will continue to monitor the implementation of a small number of recommendations that remain in progress at both services, and receive feedback from the services and the community through the OHO's ongoing stakeholder engagement on the provision of health services in the region.

