

Part 2 Description of the Mornington Island and Doomadgee Communities

4. Description of the communities

Mornington Island is an indigenous community situated in the Gulf of Carpentaria (Appendix B contains a map of the Island). There is one township on the Island called Gununa. Homeland out-stations are being developed in areas away from the township. Doomadgee as a town originated in 1931 as a Brethren mission near the coast on the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was moved from the original site to a pastoral station on the banks of the Nicholson River in 1936. The reasons given for this move included officialdom's concerns about the quality of food and water. The Doomadgee Aboriginal Community Council received the Deed of Grant in Land Trust in 1987 (Appendix C contains a legend of the township). Descriptions of the Doomadgee and Mornington Island communities are now provided.

4.1 Location of the communities

Mornington Island is situated in the south eastern section of the Gulf of Carpentaria and is the largest island in a group of approximately twenty islands known as the Wellesley Islands. Mornington Island is situated 500 kilometres north of Mount Isa, 220 kilometres north of Normanton and 700 kilometres west of Cairns by air. There are air services to Cairns six days a week and to Mount Isa five days a week. The operation of the air services depend on weather conditions. A barge operates weekly from Karumba and takes between 12 to 14 hours to reach the Island. The main township of Gununa is located on the western tip of the island. North-east of Gununa, approximately 30 kilometres by dirt road, is a small fishing resort known as Birri Lodge. The trip can take over forty minutes due to the poor condition of the road. There are at least 22 out-stations spread around the coast as well as inland on Mornington Island and the surrounding islands. The number of out-stations is increasing.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of Doomadgee located near the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria was designated as a mission in 1931 and was relocated to its present location in 1936. Today Doomadgee is located 618 kilometres north west of Mount Isa, 325 kilometres west of Normanton, 150 kilometres east of the Northern Territory border and 130 kilometres south of the Gulf of Carpentaria. In the dry season it takes 4 hours to drive to Doomadgee from Normanton and 8 hours from Mount Isa. Doomadgee is cut off by road for at least two months each year during the wet season. There are daily flights Monday to Friday to and from Mount Isa and Cairns. During the wet season the air strip may be closed.

The isolated locations of both communities would require local pre-hospital care services to be self sustaining as there are logistical and practical problems associated with the provision of backup.

4.2 Climate

The climate in Doomadgee is usually hot and dry. There are mainly two seasons. During the dry season (winter) no rainfall is expected, can be eight months long and maximum daily temperatures are usually around 25 to 35 degrees Celsius. During the wet season (summer) November to February, maximum daily temperatures are around 35 to 45 degrees Celsius. Once the rain starts the roads are closed as there are no sealed roads. The roads are closed for over two months, sometimes up to four months.

The climate in Mornington Island is warm to very hot and humid from October to March. Rain, storms and cyclones are common at this time of year. The most recent cyclone to hit Mornington Island occurred in April 1995. The climatic conditions throughout the year have operational implications for pre-hospital care services. Appropriate vehicles, equipment, technology and backup are required.

4.3 Population

According to the ABS 1996 Census the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population for Mornington Island was 642 and 1003 for Doomadgee. At Mornington Island the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community comprised 81.1% of the population while at Doomadgee the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community comprised 93.3% of the population.

Projections of the Queensland Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning reveal the proportion of young people on Mornington Island (30.7%) and at Doomadgee (42.1%) to be high. The proportion of working age people at Doomadgee is thought to be low (approximately 57%). This is compared to approximately 65.4% of the Mornington Island community. The proportion of elderly people at Mornington Island (3.9%) and at Doomadgee (2.2%) is low and reflects the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population's lower life expectancy.

The ABS Census Statistics are believed to under estimate both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and the birth rate of the Mornington Island and Doomadgee communities. In 1996 the local councils and community agencies estimate the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Doomadgee to be 1,075 and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Mornington Island to be in the vicinity of 1,170 persons.

4.4 Service profiles of the two communities

Employment

There are three main employment sectors in Doomadgee: Government employees, Council employees and the government funded Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) employees:

- Government employees work in the Hospital, School, Store, Police station, Aboriginal and Islander Health Program.
- Council employees are administrative staff, plumbers, carpenters, mechanics, electricians etc.

- CDEP employees work in many fields with work projects going on in the town.

On Mornington Island the Trade Training Centre assists in the training of apprentices and CDEP workers in basic work skills. It is also used as a venue for training courses when staff from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) visit the island. Residents who seek to further their education beyond these services do so by correspondence or by travelling to larger areas with better educational facilities.

Educational Facilities

Schools in Doomadgee cater for preschool to grade 10. Students who wish to continue through to Grade 11 and 12 go to boarding schools on the east coast. In 1995, 270 students were enrolled at the school. Staff include a Principal, 16 Teachers, seven Teachers Aides, and eight auxiliary staff. There is no TAFE or further educational facilities available in Doomadgee.

The Mornington Island State School caters for around 210 children from kindergarten up to Grade 10. The attendance rate is about 70 percent. As a number of children live with their parents on out-stations, to enable these children to keep up with their education, the school operates a mobile teaching service. The school is staffed by a principal, 11 teachers, nine teacher's aides and three Administration personnel.

Health Services

Health services at Mornington Island are provided by the Hospital, the Aboriginal and Islander Health Team, the Aged Care Hostel, HACC services and a recently commenced Drug and Alcohol program. The Aboriginal Health Team (now known as Community Health) has recently been combined with the hospital into one health service. The hospital has five beds and is open 24 hours a day with a medical officer on-call out of hours. Out patient clinics are held Monday to Friday from 8.30 am to 5.30 pm. Staffing consists of a medical superintendent, a director of nursing, eight registered nurses and one personal care assistant. The hospital offers general medical services and no surgical services. Evacuations are undertaken by the Royal Flying Doctor Service. There are approximately 100 such evacuations off the island each year. A new hospital has been planned for the near future. It will provide the following in-patient facilities:

- 3 adult 2 bed wards;
- 2 paediatric 2 bed wards;
- 1 isolation ward with one bed;
- 1 palliative care bed; and
- a birthing suite with 1 bed.

Visiting services include:

- child health services through the RFDS (fortnightly);
- obstetrician and gynaecologist (monthly);
- paediatrician (monthly);
- women's health nurse (bi-monthly);

- dentist (three monthly);
- radiographer (4 monthly);
- ophthalmologist (annually);
- hearing team (6 monthly); and
- mental health services (recently increased).

The Aboriginal Health team consists of clinical nurse and three health workers. The team provides health education and promotion and liaises between Aboriginal community and other health services. Each week the team travels to the out-stations to carry out health checks on older members of the community. The Aged Persons Hostel has eleven residents aged 64 to 90 years of age. Residents suffer from dementia, cardiac and respiratory conditions, post-cardio-vascular conditions and conditions of old age.

Health services in Doomadgee are provided by the Hospital, the Aboriginal and Islander Health Team and the Aged Persons Hostel. The Doomadgee hospital has seven beds and is nearly three years old. As of July 1995 it is open 24 hours a day and has limited in-patient services available as there is generally only one resident doctor. The hospital offers general medical services and no surgical services. The medical officer is on-call at nights and on weekends. Outpatient clinics are held Monday to Friday from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm. Staffing consists of a medical superintendent, a director of nursing, eight registered nurses and one assistant nurse. The hospital offers general medical services and no surgical services. Child health services are also provided by the hospital. All patients requiring surgical, obstetric or complicated medical treatment are referred to Mount Isa Hospital. Emergency evacuations are undertaken by the Royal Flying Doctor Service. On average there would be approximately 110 RFDS evacuations to Mount Isa each year. All of these patients are transported to the airport by the ambulance vehicle. Visiting services include:

- obstetrician and gynaecologist (monthly);
- paediatrician (bi-monthly);
- women's health nurse (bi-weekly);
- dentist (3 monthly);
- hearing team (4-6 monthly);
- alcohol and drug services (monthly);
- sexual health services (occasionally); and
- mental health services (recently increased).

The Aboriginal and Islander Health Team consist of a Clinical Nurse and Health Workers. The role and function of the health team is to provide health education and health promotion throughout the community. The Doomadgee aged persons hostel has a capacity for 10 residents and is presently at full capacity. There are 5 female and 5 male residents, their ages range from 28 to 90 years of age. These residents suffer from mental

retardation, dementia, conditions arising from cardio-vascular accidents and old age.

Police Services

The Queensland Police Service on Mornington Island is stationed in the township of Gununa. A new, single-storey, Police Station was completed in early 1994. The complex also accommodates a Watch House, a Court House and sleeping quarters for visiting Magistrates. The current police establishment consists of one Police Sergeant (Officer-In-Charge), two Senior Constables, one Constable and 12 Community Police. The two junior officers are rotated each six months from Mount Isa/Doomadgee.

The Queensland Police Service has a police station located in the township of Doomadgee. At present the police station is in a converted house with a separate watch house at the back of the station. There are two houses to accommodate two permanent officers and a single mans quarters to accommodate the three officers who are sent to Doomadgee on a 6 month posting. The police establishment at the moment is:

- 1 Police Sergeant. (Officer In Charge);
- 2 Senior Constables;
- 2 Constables;
- 5 Community Police.

There are no Police Liaison Officers.

In January 1996 a new \$3.5 million police station was commenced. The complex includes has three new residences for the permanent officers who are posted to Doomadgee. On regular occasions, officers are brought in from Burketown and Mount Isa to assist Doomadgee Police when large brawls and street fights break out. Some of these fights have involved fire arms.

General Services

Mornington Island has a general store and butcher with most items being 30 to 50 per cent more expensive than on the east coast, for example, a carton of beer is \$60. The post office is located in Gununa near the general store. At present there are no banking facilities but the Council will cash cheques. From 1996 a charge of five dollars applied to any cheques cashed.

Doomadgee has a general store which is open from 8.30 am to 4.00 pm weekdays (closes for lunch from 1.00 pm to 2.00 pm). It is not open during the weekend. Petrol and diesel are only available at the general store. The store is operated by the Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs. There is a baker who prepares fresh bread and sells soft drinks daily except for every second weekend. There is a post office, Commonwealth Bank, Social Security Office and Flight West Airlines booking agency. All tradespeople, carpenters, plumbers, electricians mechanics, etc are employed by or contracted to the Council. There are no private businesses in Doomadgee.

The expense associated with the purchase of fresh food, services, goods and commodities impacts on health, well-being and quality of life.

4.5 Current pre-hospital care services

Up until February 1998, a group of volunteers or honoraries operated a roster to provide ambulance services at Mornington Island. The service largely relied on two volunteers. All people involved with these temporary arrangements had advanced first aid training. The Community Development Employment Program paid the salaries of two honoraries who operated the ambulance 8.00 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday. The other honoraries performed their voluntary duties on top of full-time paid employment. There were no permanent QAS officers located at Mornington Island until February 1998. Due to the high workload and its impact on the honoraries, the Training Officer of the RHSET funded project provided relief to the honoraries during 1997. Since 18 September 1996, the honorary service had the use of a land cruiser, four wheel drive single stretcher troop carrier as well as a Toyota Hiace commuter bus (the latter proved to be unsuitable to local conditions). The Council paid for the fuel and repairs on the Hiace bus which will continue to be used by the honoraries for non-urgent hospital transport.

In 1996/97, the Queensland Ambulance Service funded half the salary of a hospital employee, a wardsman, Curtis Mitchell, to enable him to operate the ambulance at Doomadgee. Curtis has commenced the Associate Diploma of Ambulance. He was at times assisted by a small number of volunteers. The pre-hospital care services at Doomadgee used a commuter bus which, like the Hiace Bus on Mornington Island, proved unsuited to local conditions throughout the year. The four wheel drive vehicle which had been initially provided was damaged beyond repair in a road accident and the QAS was not in a position to replace the damaged vehicle with another four wheel drive.⁵ Mid-way through 1997 Curtis Mitchell found he was no longer able to operate the ambulance. Currently, there is no QAS service operating at Doomadgee.