



Doctor Dave,
our man out west

Bush, BodyBalance... bereavement – elements in a GP's perfect lifestyle.

Kevin Booth interviews Dr Dave McKenzie of Titirangi Family Health Care.

Most of us think being a GP is about life, dealing with sick people certainly, but living ones. For Dr Dave McKenzie, one of the most rewarding areas of his practice is working with terminally ill patients.

"You aren't just dealing with one person, but with their family and everyone who cares for them. You are helping a person to die well, settle their fears about what's going to happen, get things out in the open."

As a general practitioner he sees himself as a coordinator between all the different people involved in a person's passing away – from

nursing staff and the people managing the situation at home to the large health institutions. This makes him the crossroads for intense psychological and social mediating, but it is also where the rewards lie, helping people deal with their emotions, come to terms with what's happening.

"What we end up realising is that the process of dying is about life. It's a great privilege for me to be able to help people with that process."

Dave grew up in One Tree Hill, Auckland, and has almost always

been involved in medicine:

"I was really one of those guys who needed to start work as soon as I left school, so I went into the paramedical field."

After three years training he graduated as a cardio-pulmonary technician and set off on his OE. While away he realised the pathway he had chosen was limited, that it would consist of doing tests for other people, rather than having a say. So it was back to New Zealand: six years at Otago Uni, plus four years as a hospital house surgeon and registrar. Because of his cardio-pulmonary background he had initially envisaged becoming a cardiologist, but he was also attracted to paediatrics, working with kids. Finally he decided being a GP offered the most fulfilment.

"What I get out of doing this job is that I really like helping people to make positive change, helping people to make their own lives even better... General practice [is] ideal because I get to work everyday with ordinary people, just normal people, and help them to improve their health."

The offer of work at Titirangi came while Dave was working as a locum (a relieving doctor) close by. It was his initial ideal choice as a practice, offering almost all the elements he was looking for.

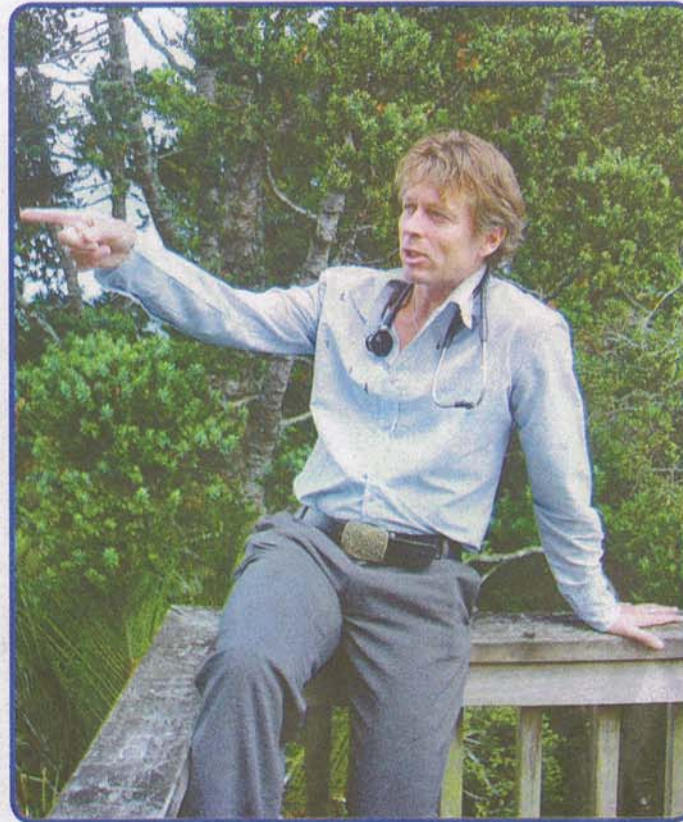
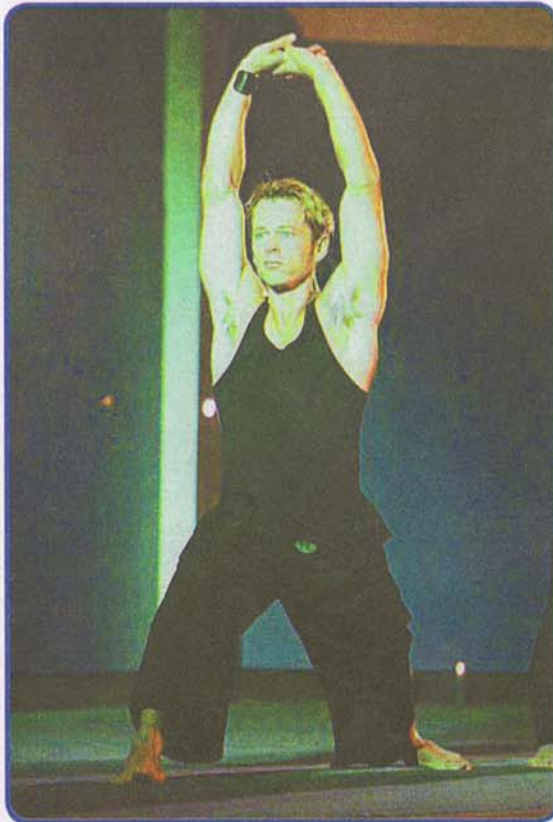
"I really enjoyed it... a well-run practice, great nurses, great receptionists, a group of doctors with whom I got on well and an office that looked out over the bush. So, a beautiful environment."

Yet he was still reluctant to accept a permanent practice at Titirangi, because he specifically wanted to work with the gay community.

"I had to do a reality check in my head because it was one of my own preconceptions that most of the gay community live in Central Auckland and that is not the case at all. When I thought about that I realised that there are a lot of gay people living out in the west. It turned out really well actually. I don't have a huge gay client base, but I have a really nice gay client base."

And his job involves far more than just curing patients' physical ills:

"I had a gentleman come in to see me for the first time. And he was an older, married man who would have sexual liaisons with guys. He



Community Hero

had never ever talked to anybody in his life before about this. He had never talked about his sexuality. He was concerned about his sexual health... It was wonderful to listen, hear him offload stuff about himself that he needed to unload. So it's important for me to stick my hand up and say 'I'm a gay doctor'."

After sitting down virtually all day, Dave needs action in the evenings. Having been into fitness from the age of twenty, he has worked as a fitness instructor since the mid-90s. Now he works at Les Mills, teaching a discipline called BodyBalance, a combination of Tai Chi, yoga and pilates.

"It's a mind-body programme, set to music, where you work on strength and flexibility. And you also come out feeling very relaxed and energised... People come in stressed from a day at work... I help them connect with themselves... They have a great workout and feel a bit

better about themselves when they leave."

It compliments his life as a GP, which is emotionally intense.

"Every fifteen minutes, a new person [is] coming through the door with their concerns and they really need to be listened to. My job is to be more than 100% focussed on that person. You've got to really hear what they're saying, what they're feeling, what's going on for them. We work together to achieve better health."

So it angers him when he hears the whole medical profession getting slandered in the media, tarred with the same negative brush of sensationalist health disaster stories.

"Doctors... really care about people. They are always trying to do the best for their clients. You are restricted in resources and in your time, you're dealing with a lot of emotions, you're often in the firing line."

But the perks?

"My receptionist always knows when one of my patients is gay... When I come out of a consultation, there's something different about me." he says smiling, without going into details. A kind of Hippocratic confessional?

Though he rejects the label "community hero", there is a kind of light maybe, a sense of joy at working with people in the community, giving 100% of his energies, that does shine out... heroically.

You can request Doctor Dave's services at
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