

LIFE after Dr Death

It can be difficult enough for overseas-trained doctors to adjust to life in rural Australia, but some have found it even harder in the wake of the Bundaberg crisis. But reports of discrimination and bullying have been matched by tales of acceptance and belonging, and proof that patience and effort on both sides form a strong community.

STORY MELISSA SWEET ◉ MAIN PHOTO WARREN CLARKE

When the scandal at Queensland's Bundaberg Hospital erupted into national headlines last year, it brought a backlash for many overseas-trained doctors. Some came under increased scrutiny from patients and colleagues, and others felt the stirrings of racial discrimination.

It must have been particularly uncomfortable for any doctor at risk of being confused with the errant surgeon Dr Jayant Patel? Not at all, says Dr Ebrahim Patel – not even though his surgery at Biggenden is less than an hour's drive west of Bundaberg and he was rung by a journalist who assumed he was "Dr Death".

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Settling in and attracting

Since moving to Wagga Wagga five years ago, Dr Ayman Shenouda and his wife, Dr Sammi Azab, have been busy, building and creating. They have not only set up a state-of-art medical practice, but have also helped establish a new church.

As a result, the Riverina city is gaining a reputation as a centre for Coptic Christians, with one unexpected side effect being an influx of doctors.

When Dr Shenouda and his wife arrived in the area, two other doctors' families shared their faith. Now there are about 25 Coptic Christian doctors, and the area's medico shortage has been reversed.

"We are one of the first churches outside the



Dr Ayman Shenouda (left), with Father Moussa El Antony, helped establish a church for Coptic Christians in Wagga Wagga: "It wasn't intentionally done to get doctors into the area, but it's had that effect," he says.

a new workforce

metropolitan areas," says Dr Shenouda, 42, a deacon. "It wasn't intentionally done to get doctors into the area, but it's had that effect.

However, Dr Shenouda does not want to be perceived as part of a separatist group and makes a conscious effort to mix with the broader community. He is also active in the local division.

Last year he and his wife opened a purpose-built practice, with consulting rooms for doctors, a podiatrist, dietitian, three nurses and 18 support staff.

It has been designed to provide a relaxing, light-filled atmosphere, with every consulting room overlooking a courtyard with a fountain.

The practice runs patient education nights,

includes a comprehensive diabetic program, and is part of the national primary care collaboration. Dr Shenouda also helped to establish a successful after-hours service that involves all local GPs sharing an on-call roster.

Dr Shenouda and his wife also run a clinic at the small nearby town of The Rock: "Financially, it's not good to go out there twice a week – we go once each – but we feel it's part of our service to the community."

He adds: "We feel proud of what we're doing."

Dr Shenouda can relate to colleagues who have difficulties adjusting to a new country as he had his own share of struggles when he arrived from Egypt about 15 years ago. He is

now involved in mentoring and supporting other overseas-trained doctors.

More funding and support is needed to help them gain the necessary skills, he says.

"Instead of criticising them, we have to support them and try to help them out," he says.

Dr Azab, 39, says it is also important that newcomers adjust to their new situation. "You don't have to expect everything will go your own way, you have to learn you are in a new community. You can't ask the community to give everything, you have to do your share."

After growing up in Cairo, Dr Azab loves the clean, easy lifestyle on offer in "beautiful" Wagga Wagga. "I wouldn't want to move for a million dollars," she says.