

Has general practice changed?

Lance Austin

From 1953 to 1963 I was a rural general practitioner in Lumsden, Northern Southland. Two years solo, then thankfully with a male partner. The practice was rather extensive, from Riversdale to Milford Sound east to west and Dipton to Kingston south to north.

Early one Sunday morning I received a message to say that there had been a shooting accident up the Eglinton valley between Te Anau and Milford, in the aptly named Mistake Creek area.

I arranged for the Southland ambulance from Invercargill 50 miles away to collect me, then called my off-duty partner to stand in for the practice for the day. By ambulance

100 miles to Knobbs Flat, a group of local volunteers was waiting. We crossed the Eglinton River on a fallen tree, and climbed the mountainside to where the youths of the shooting party were camped.

They had shot and skinned a deer and as it was raining one of them had hung the skin over his pack as a protection. One of the party then shot him dead – an object lesson in bushcraft!

In the confusion, one of them had injured a leg, and this was our patient. The team carried him on a stretcher down the slope to the river. We forded this waist deep – and was that water cold! Then 100 miles to home while the ambulance completed its 300-mile round trip to Invercargill hospital.

It had been a long hard day and I thought I deserved some recompense; I sent the patient's father an account for 10 pounds (20 dollars), and was rather surprised to receive an irate letter in return. *'How had I dared to charge for my services, when everyone else was a free volunteer?'* Well, you write it off to experience.

Years later, talking to a doctor from the later established Te Anau Medical Centre, he said *'Oh! That is 10 minutes in the helicopter'*.

Perhaps country practice is easier now.

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P.S. For comparison, Queenstown Medical Centre recently notified a \$200 fee for home visits.