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Uniting in Care and Compassion

UnitingCare Queensland is reshaping the way health and aged-care services are being delivered. From its person-centred health and community services to its new digital hospital, UnitingCare Queensland is an industry pioneer.

Images courtesy of UnitingCare Queensland

Starting her career as a front-line social worker before taking up her first executive role with the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, Anne Cross has long had an interest in health and the wellbeing of people and communities. Now, as CEO of UnitingCare Queensland, Anne is able to harness that same passion and create a real impact in the areas of aged care, health, disability, and families and children.

“UnitingCare Queensland, through its service groups Blue Care, UnitingCare Health, UnitingCare Community, and ARRCs [Australian Regional and Remote Community Services Ltd], is part of the social and economic fabric of hundreds of communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Knowing the stories of the organisation is critical. Genuine interest in what is happening for clients and patients and our staff and volunteers as they do their work is an imperative. Connecting

these stories with strategy and the strategic environment is essential work for a leader in an organisation such as UnitingCare Queensland.”

UnitingCare Health has partnered with the Commonwealth Government to construct Australia’s first fully integrated digital hospital. “In June 2012, we signed a contract with the government securing a grant of \$47 million, which is about half the cost of construction and development for both the hospital and the integrated e-health solution. It’s been an extraordinarily complex and exciting project, including extensive redesign of how our clinicians and staff go about their work. UnitingCare Health assembled a great team of people to lead and undertake that work in conjunction with our partners.

“This will result in each patient having an electronic medical record that can be accessed by multiple users, available in

multiple locations. This means an end to reading doctors’ handwriting and allows quick access to patient records from anywhere in the hospital. Clinicians will also be able to review results and order tests or prescriptions from wherever they are. Medication will be dispensed through an electronically controlled system. We expect, given evidence from overseas, that this will significantly reduce medication error and improve speed of response to patients.”

Partnerships are also vital to creating mutually beneficial relationships between UnitingCare Queensland and its suppliers. “Our partnerships are also critical to our business. In our aged-care and community services delivered through Blue Care and UnitingCare Community, our staff travel more than 30 million kilometres each year. That is a lot of vehicles on the road every day. Managing the fleet from a cost and safety perspective is very important to us. >

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“Pickles is a really great example of a supplier relationship and the trust that we always hope to develop with all our suppliers. We’ve had a trading relationship for a long time, but have only recently turned this into a longer-term contractual relationship. That’s been a great outcome, which is consistent with the maturing of our procurement strategy.”

“Annually, UnitingCare Queensland sells about 500 vehicles including cars, buses, and trucks through Pickles. Our relationship with Pickles is about trying to get the best return on assets, so Pickles advises on the product we’re selling to ensure it’s a premium product and that we’re selling it at the best time to get the best return. That’s why our relationship with Pickles is so important to us. We meet regularly with all our suppliers to review the supplier arrangements, to gather market intelligence, and to ensure that all parties are happy.”

ARRCS became part of UnitingCare Queensland in July this year, offering aged-care and community services in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, Mutitjulu, and Docker River.

“UnitingCare Queensland became involved when the previous provider was unable to sustain the services both from a quality and a financial perspective. UnitingCare Queensland, together with government, the Uniting Church, and its aged-care providers across Australia has been involved over the past year to stabilise the services and to work out a solution that would see the services continue. It involved protracted discussions and negotiations, but was a great example of the Uniting Church, its aged-care providers, and the government working together to ensure that some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people and communities continue to receive the care and support they need. This is what was at the heart of this issue. It was a priority for everyone.”

Anne has also been instrumental in re-engineering UnitingCare Queensland’s business model. “The origins of UnitingCare Queensland grew out of the work of congregations and other visionaries in the Uniting Church, but changes in community and government expectations were presenting significant operational, regulatory, and governance challenges. Our key work over the past 10 years has been to merge all those disparate services into a strong, mission-inspired, mature, and capable organisation, and we have done that.”

“Now our service groups are focused on responding to significant reform in all of our sectors—that is, aged-care, disability, health, and family and children services. The major drivers of change in the health and community services sector over the next 10 years include increasing customer expectation, increasing market contestability, reforms to government funding and contracting, and an increasing emphasis on cost efficiency.”

“To be successful going forward, it’s really important that we’re able to demonstrate positive outcomes for customers, clients, and patients, and that we anticipate their preferences. Thus we’ve been reviewing and transforming our services, business models, products, our capital investment, our workforce strategy, and our technology strategy, and we’re along the path on all of those fronts.”

At the heart of this are UnitingCare Queensland’s values. “I am proud of the culture we have and are creating; our values are central to our real focus on supporting people to be ‘the best they can be’ irrespective of their age, their disabilities, their health, or other disadvantages they experience,” Anne says.

The organisation is also committed to reconciliation and creating opportunities for Indigenous employment. “We’ve had a deep concern about the circumstances that Indigenous people face in our

country. About three years ago, we decided we would move down the path of having a Reconciliation Action Plan [RAP]. Our RAP provides a very systematic way of thinking about what we can do to contribute to Closing the Gap between the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. The actions contained in our RAP help ensure the organisation has a heart for and focus on reconciliation.

“One of our key interests is to create opportunities for employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are committed to ensuring our services for Indigenous peoples are culturally appropriate, and it follows that as many staff as possible in these services should be Indigenous. In some of our services specifically for Indigenous peoples, 85 per cent of the staff are Indigenous. We have also supported employment of Indigenous people across our organisation. I’d like to see all employers offering employment opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

Anne is very optimistic about the future for UnitingCare Queensland. “There is no doubt that we’ll have to continue to adapt and change because we’re living in a very rapidly changing policy and industry environment. Our readiness and response to these reforms is a key priority for me. It is a great opportunity to improve outcomes for people and communities; that is our mission, and we want to be part of that. We will seek growth in services that help us balance the sustainability of our portfolio of services overall. We want to maintain our very significant regional and remote services, and many of these are quite marginal from a financial perspective.”

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