

# Compassionate CARE

One of the oldest healthcare providers in Australia, Mercy Health is expanding its services to support more people across the country.

Images courtesy of Mercy Health



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*The CEO Magazine*  
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- Stephen Cornelissen

**W**ith a legacy that stretches back to nineteenth-century Dublin, Mercy Health has a long history of caring for the most vulnerable in the community. Founded by the Sisters of Mercy, the healthcare organisation opened its first Victorian hospital in 1920, originally in response to a flu pandemic. Presently operating as a not-for-profit organisation, the healthcare provider now employs more than 6,000 people, with numbers expected to grow further as it expands its footprint across Australia.

CEO, Adjunct Professor Stephen Cornelissen, has been with the organisation for 12 years, bringing with him decades of experience in healthcare. He is passionate about the work Mercy Health does and the compassionate ethos that drives the organisation and its employees. “I have been in the healthcare industry my whole life, ranging from roles in community health to child and adolescent mental health,” Stephen says.

“I have worked in policy and planning areas with the state government, funding and advisory roles to ministers and state governments, as well as running a number of hospitals or divisions of hospitals in South Australia, New Zealand, and Victoria. I’ve had three previous roles at Mercy Health: general manager of one of its hospitals, overseeing its entire public health network, and also chief operating officer.

“I believe an understanding of the health industry at various levels has given me a very broad insight into some of the health issues faced on a daily basis. This has shaped my vision of how I would like to see health and workforce education services delivered.”

Mercy Health’s Christian history, its values, and staff are extremely important to the organisation. “We have six values: compassion, hospitality, respect, innovation, stewardship, and teamwork. Our values define who we are as an organisation. They are central to our mission, as these values are

what enable us to bring that mission to life.”

Mercy Health’s mission is to care for those in need. With this in mind, Mercy Health has a long employee selection process, ensuring every person employed is the right cultural fit. This has led to an extraordinary 95 per cent staff retention rate over the past few years. “You don’t need to be Catholic to work for us; you certainly don’t need to be Catholic to be cared for by us,” Stephen says.

“What we do ask from every single employee is that they share a common bond, and that is to care for those in need. Because of that, we attract and employ like-minded people who share our Christian mission. We also work hard to ensure our workplaces are very flexible, and where possible we have arrangements that allow people to manage their work–life balance.”

Mercy Health is also considered an outstanding employer in supporting and employing >



women. It was one of only 75 businesses in Australia awarded the Workplace Gender Equality

Agency (WGEA) Employer of Choice accreditation in 2014. "We should be a WGEA employer of choice because if our workforce is 75 per cent women, then our management should be represented by a similar number—it's just common sense."

In recent years, Mercy Health has grown from being a primarily Victorian-based operation to providing services in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, and Western Australia. While this is great news for the organisation, it has also provided challenges for Stephen. "The challenge for me is about growth; we need to grow so that we get the economies of scale, but we also need to remain relevant and influential in our chosen areas."

"How do you move from a predominantly state-based service where you have had good oversight to an organisation that is geographically dispersed and with

different industries within it? That is probably our biggest challenge."

Moving into the future, Mercy Health is working to expand all aspects of the organisation, including aged care, which is expected to grow rapidly to cope with Australia's ageing population. "We need to continue to grow our aged-care ministry on a national scale, but also have scalable capacity wherever we are. We need to ensure that we can have the right infrastructure so the care we're delivering is of a very high quality that is both compassionate and viable."

"As an organisation, we also want to grow and aspire to be the best that we can be. I always use a quote from our foundress, Catherine McAuley, who said there is nothing of greater importance than the perfect discharge of our ordinary duties. We're trying to innovate, to be better, and to continue looking at how we can improve what we are doing to benefit people. That is where we should always be striving; it's our light on the hill."

Stephen hopes to continue leading an organisation that has strong growth while always staying true to its values and heritage. Mercy Health's core value of compassion—especially for the elderly, the disadvantaged, and the marginalised—will continue to shape its response to healthcare issues in the country. "The Sisters of Mercy have always responded when needed, and not just in health, education, and welfare. They have responded to the needs of the time, and as an organisation Mercy Health continues to do that as well."

"In Australia, as in many other Western societies, we have an ageing population and yet we still do not value the wisdom and contribution of the aged as much as we should. Many aged people are not necessarily spiritually or financially poor, but due to many Australians' views on ageing they are at a significant disadvantage within the larger community. It is therefore our responsibility to respond to that in a meaningful and compassionate manner." •

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