**DoE Podcast**

**State School Registered Nurses**

**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast. Proudly sponsored by Teachers Mutual Bank, the bank founded my teachers for teachers.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Did you know the Queensland Department of Education employs registered nurses throughout the state. State School registered nurses have been making a difference for students with health support needs attending school for more than 30 years. Today state school registered nurse Grant Keats joins me to talk about the important role he and his colleagues perform. Thanks for joining me today, Grant.

**Grant Keats:** No, that's my pleasure.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, Grant?

**Grant Keats:** I've been nursing for 30 plus years now. Like a lot of people my age, I did my nurses' training in a general hospital. And since then I've worked in a lot of different areas.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And how long have you been nursing in a school environment?

**Grant Keats:** I'm just rounding off my 15th year with the department now and in this role, so something I've enjoyed and certainly stayed with for a long time.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And what was it about nursing that appealed to you?

**Grant Keats:** Nursing in general. It actually, wasn't my first career option. I originally wanted to be a priest.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Wow. That's a difference.

**Grant Keats:** But there's a lot of similarities. You're still working with people and help them to get over some of the worst times in their life. But the opportunity came up to do the last hospital based training in Tasmania. So, I put my name down for that and got accepted. And I'm still nursing.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Why did you choose to start working as a nurse in a state school?

**Grant Keats:** It's now a field that's grown in importance and numbers in Australia. Now there’s a lot of students that have chronic or complex health needs that require management during the school day. So, I had been working with a training and support agency in the disability sector, and I'd been developing health plans for the clients, providing training for people that had been doing the courses in support work in disability. And I noticed there was an advert for a school nurse based at Currumbin Special School. So, I decided to apply because it was along the similar lines that I had been working in.

But when I rocked up for the interview, I was advised that the position was a little bit different to what had been advertised. So, the advert listed duties that relate to the older style of school-based nurse role that we had in the department where nurses primarily were based in one school, that was usually a special school.

And they attended to all the procedures such as the enteral tube feeds, tracheostomy management, administering the medications, et cetera. And it was during the interview that I was advised the position will be providing a service to a number of schools instead. And teaching the school staff how to attend to these procedures instead of actually doing the procedures themselves.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** How is working as a Department of Education nurse different from working as a hospital-based nurse?

**Grant Keats:** It's very different. I think one of the biggest things, particularly when you've come from a hospital setting is that many of the health procedures that school staff assist with are based on community health principles rather than acute care that would occur in a hospital.

So this has an impact on a whole range of issues that are involved in health procedures, such as infection control. So, in a school or a community setting, this means that clean principles are used, for example, rather than using an aseptic or sterile principle like in a hospital.

So that often means a change in the mindset when you start working with the education department and thinking about how you can perform the procedures differently and to fit in with a school routine and time table.

Also, the parents are usually the go-to for advice and further information for school staff with managing health conditions, rather than referring things back to the treating doctor or specialist like you would in a hospital setting.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What are the challenges in a school setting?

**Grant Keats:** So, one of the mentors I had when I started in this role used to always say that as nurses in the education department, we speak two languages. Ed speak and med speak. And that's very true. And sometimes it feels as though we are the connection between those two worlds.

A lot of the SSRNs, state schools registered nurses now share office locations with another nurse, which is good because you actually have a buddy to bounce ideas from, discuss complex cases and share your nursing knowledge bases and expertise.

It's great that we've now have senior nursing positions like clinical nurse consultants in each region and a statewide nurse advisor who are all there and available to provide clinical supervision, advice, support and nursing leadership.

In this role, it's very rewarding when school staff appreciate the service, when you're able to facilitate a student with a health condition or a need to safely attend school. And for school staff working with those students to competently and safely assist the student with their health needs during that time.

So it is a very rewarding career, even though there are a lot of challenges involved. And I think if there are no challenges, that's when you start to get complacent and bored in what is happening in your work life.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** So, what does your current role entail?

**Grant Keats:** It's a very varied and large role. So similar to the other therapy specialists that work for the department, we have a number of schools on our caseload. This involves seeing students with long term or chronic health conditions that are referred to the nursing service.

Developing school relevant health plans. So that actually involves meeting with the parent or the guardians and the students. And that can be in person or during an interview over the phone to complete a health and nursing assessment, identify what the needs are of the student while they're attending school.

So it may involve providing any associated training and practical skills assessments for staff who are required to assist those students with those health procedures. So, you're going to have a lot of regular visits and contacts with the schools that are on your caseload and the staff working with those students to help them facilitate the student's attendance at school and troubleshoot any issues or problems as they arise.

There's a large component of providing ongoing support and advice for schools in relation to the health conditions in general, and assisting schools to interpret and implement departmental health related policies, procedures, and guidelines.

Health is such a big thing for a lot of students attending schools these days. And if they're not able to manage their health condition effectively, they're not going to be able to concentrate and perform effectively at school either. So, it's important that they have access to the assistance that they require during their school career.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And what is it that you find satisfying about your work? You've touched on that briefly before, but is there anything else you'd like to add there?

**Grant Keats:** It's being able to work collaboratively with the students, their families, school staff, their treating medical teams and community agencies to develop the health plans and strategies for managing their health conditions at schools.

This can make all the difference in the student being able to safely attend school or not. And being able to participate in a full range of extracurricular activities alongside their peers and their friends.

It's really satisfying hearing back from parents how relieved they are that their child has been able to attend school with that support. It's especially so when children are just starting school. So often when a child has multiple or complex health needs, parents can be extremely anxious about leaving their child in the care of complete strangers who may or may not have an understanding of the various health conditions or their child's specific health needs.

So, it's really satisfying being able to help those parents alleviate some of that anxiety and you get to know students, the families and staff very well, especially if you have some of those schools and students on your caseload for a number of years.

It's a great feeling to see students’ progress through their school career and see them grow and develop over the years and even gaining varying degrees of independence in self-managing their health conditions and independence in daily living.

So there have been cases where I've seen students from when they've started in prep, all the way to graduating in Year 12 and seen them grow and develop during that time. So, it's really nice to get to know those students really, really well.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Yeah, that would be lovely. Is there anything about your job that was a surprise to you or may be a surprise to anyone listening?

**Grant Keats:** These days, in fact, all the states and territories in Australia have varying roles of school nurses, but Queensland is the only state that provides a nursing service in this type from within the department itself.

So other states have school roles that focus on mental health and wellbeing. Nurses who operate a clinic style of service or departments that even contract nursing services and staff training from external sources.

So it was very interesting to see that Queensland was so advanced that we were providing this service from within the department itself. So that's something I'm really proud of. And I often boast to my nursing colleagues and friends in other states.

No days ever the same. There's always a new challenge to meet. Even the best laid plans often need to plan B in the back of your mind that might need to be put in place. And that's been very evident in the past two years in a COVID environment that you always need to have a backup plan to deal with things that might arise all of a sudden.

Although you're aware of your commitment to that school, each individual school doesn't know what these are. So your negotiation skills, cooperation, communication, and being very adaptable are absolutely paramount in this role. And I think one of the most important things of all is having a sense of humor.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Well, thank you very much for your time, Grant.

**Grant Keats:** My pleasure.

**Announcer:** You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders past and present for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.