

2018 NAFEA Scholarship Recipient

Cassandra Ferlazzo

This year I completed a seven-week rural occupational therapy practice education in Darwin, Northern Territory. I was assigned to the occupational therapy service in the inpatient rehabilitation ward at Palmerston Regional Hospital. My case load consisted of adult patients with a variety of conditions including stroke, traumatic brain injury, amputations and general deconditioning.

This has been my most challenging occupational therapy practice education, however has offered the most professional growth. The goal-driven nature of the inpatient rehabilitation ward and the complexity of the patient's conditions, therapy and discharge meant that I was constantly learning and developing my occupational therapy lens. Having these experiences in a rural location meant that I was problem solving through the barriers of a rural setting to ensure the patients were as independent and safe as possible at discharge. This practice education was my first experience working as part of a multidisciplinary team which was beneficial in a small hospital as it allowed me to get to know the roles of the other disciplines to work together to achieve the patient goals.

This practice education gave me the opportunity to work closely with Indigenous Australians to reach their therapy goals by overcoming their challenges in a culturally appropriate way. I was able to further develop my rapport building skills with these patients as I found it to be much more challenging than any of my previous experiences. I gained an appreciation for storytelling as a means of communication in order to discuss challenges and goals of the patients, whilst also improving my communication skills and cultural sensitivity and awareness. This experience allowed me to increase my competence and appreciation for Indigenous cultural in a way that wouldn't be achieved in an urban location.

Living in Darwin for seven weeks was a wonderful experience and a great opportunity to live away from the bigger cities. The locals are so friendly and happy to share the secrets on all the best food places and adventure hotspots. From local markets, sunset picnics and waterfront walks, there was always something to do during the week. On the weekends, I was able to explore the surrounding areas of Darwin including Litchfield National Park, Edith Falls, Katherine Gorge and Adelaide River, where I swam at the most spectacular waterfalls and lagoons, watched wild crocodile feeding, admired the Australian outback beauty and swam with a crocodile or two.

Participating in this rural practice education allowed me to develop my resourcefulness and clinical skills and further refine my occupational therapy lens in an unknown and unique environment. I believe that I embraced the opportunities and showed initiative in participating in all aspects of the role. Having the opportunity to experience the benefits and challenges of rural health allowed me to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the work rural health practitioners do. I would highly recommend to future students to participate in a rural placement as it gives you the opportunity to be pushed to your limits, challenge yourself, travel somewhere new and build professional relationships and network with a wider range of occupational therapists across the country.

I am very thankful to the NAFEA for providing financial support which enabled me to relocate for seven weeks. It was because of this support that I was able to participate in and enjoy all aspects of my practice education experience without feeling held back by financial stress. Thank-you to the NAFEA team for your support and I wish future students' luck on their rural practice education adventures.

