

Do you have what it takes to engage with Indigenous people?

Sophie's story

Sophie is a 27-year-old GP registrar. Originally from Sydney Sophie is beginning her first rural term working at a GP practice in Far North Queensland. She can't remember meeting any Indigenous patients during her training at med school, but she does remember attending cultural awareness training, where she first appreciated the extent of trauma Indigenous people in Australia have been through. At this training, she was also asked to think about her own cultural identity for the first time: she has blonde hair and blue eyes and her ancestors were from Britain and Ireland. She has always thought of herself as Australian and is aware of both sides of her family having been in Australia for many generations. She is concerned about social justice and shocked by the disparities in health status and life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. She wants to make a difference.

In her first week, **Jason**, aged 28, is booked in to see her for a 15-minute appointment. On Tuesday morning he doesn't show up and then he phones at 4.45pm saying he really needs to see a doctor the next day. Since she is new, she has spaces in her diary, and he is booked in again to see her the next day. She checks his file before he comes in. He's only been once before which was for an employment medical. His demographic information indicates he is Aboriginal but not Torres Strait Islander.

Jason turns up a bit late, but not too late to be seen today. He looks depressed. He says his sister made the first appointment for him and he slept in and missed it, but something made him book another one. He doesn't volunteer much, but Sophie tries to be patient and eventually she can get some history from him. He says he is having trouble sleeping, worrying all the time and has lost weight due to feeling too stressed to eat. He lies awake worrying, eventually falls asleep and then struggles to get up in the morning. He recently lost his job for being late too many times. He is single but his family live in the same town and he sees them regularly.

Sophie asks the usual questions she would ask anybody she thinks might have depression. Finding Jason meets the criteria, Sophie conducts a basic health check and explains what she is thinking. She asks Jason to have some blood tests and to come back on Friday to discuss the results when they will formulate a plan to help him. Jason tells Sophie he drinks alcohol occasionally but not a lot and doesn't use any other drugs. He says he has not harmed himself or tried to kill himself in the past and doesn't have any thoughts or plans to kill himself now either. He agrees to come back and see her and he agrees not to drink alcohol for the time being. The appointment takes 35 minutes. She fortunately doesn't have anybody booked into the following 15 minute slot. She bulk bills him because it's a mixed billing practice and she has some

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discretion over that but she feels a bit worried about what her supervisor will think about it.

Sophie thinks about Jason on and off through the day and she is quite worried about him, and also about whether she has enough knowledge and experience to help him. She knows that there are many things she didn't have time to ask, especially when Jason arrived late and took so long to answer her questions, but she is quite confident she was able to exclude any significant medical causes for his symptoms and that the blood tests are likely to confirm this. Her GP supervisor Dr Bill Brophy is himself an Aboriginal man, and she asks if she can talk to him about the case. She notices herself thinking she's glad Jason had ticked "Aboriginal" on the demographic information, because otherwise she wouldn't have thought of it, given his appearance, and she doesn't want to accidentally offend Bill. She feels able to ask some of the questions on her mind, but others she feels too embarrassed to ask.

Bill is a rural generalist GP and has worked in this town for 15 years. It is in the region where he grew up, although not the town where he went to high school. He was a mature aged university student and was one of the first Aboriginal doctors to graduate in Australia. He loves both being a doctor and mentoring early career doctors. He has always been strongly connected to his Aboriginal culture and has also thought a lot of about the culture of medicine, and his identity as a doctor. He's had a lot of GP registrars through his practice and he has

a pretty good idea of some of the challenges they face in learning to become GPs, and specifically about learning to work with Indigenous patients. He has seen a lot of "Sophies" in his time. He also knows some of Jason's family, although he hasn't seen Jason himself since he was in primary school. Bill has a fair idea of what might be on Sophie's mind when she asks to talk to him about Jason.