

Media Release

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Aged-care revolutionary in running for national nursing award

The woman who transformed aged care in the tiny rural town of Port Broughton, South Australia, has been named a Nurse of the Year finalist in the HESTA Australian Nursing Awards.

When Merrilyn Hewett became Director of Nursing at Barunga Village in 1997, it was a 24-bed low-care facility with 16 independent living units. Today it is a 52-bed high and low-care facility. The facility offers specialist dementia care, respite care and 14 independent living units. A 45-home retirement village is nearing completion.

Ms Hewett's clients embrace adventure with four-night houseboat stays and 360km round trips to the zoo. Residents who spent their working lives on farms take part in crop inspections and sheep droving. Those who miss cooking help prepare vegetables for the evening meal.

"We had a huge celebration recently when four of our residents turned 100. It highlights what is possible in aged care when residents are social and enjoy their lifestyle. If you can minimise pain and depression – they are the two biggest challenges – you can have a lot of fun," Ms Hewett said.

Barunga Village's success is built on Ms Hewett's creativity and determination.

When the commercial kitchen that made the meals wouldn't prepare lambs fry and bacon, Ms Hewett built her own kitchen to ensure residents got the type of food they wanted.

Ms Hewett has worked hard to develop a culture where residents' needs are always the focus.

"We had a resident who would become quite agitated in the late afternoon. He was a farmer so we would take him to a paddock so he could feel the wheat. He would break a bit off and talk about whether it was ready – it was a meaningful activity that related to a big part of his life," she said.

Recruitment was always going to be a challenge in a 1,200-person town, so Ms Hewett decided to use a Registered Training Authority (RTO) to train workers locally. She parted company with two RTO's before finding the right cultural fit and today staff travel from much larger towns to work in Port Broughton.

She encourages a culture of professional development and believes her role is to be a good mentor.

Ms Hewett is one of five finalists in the Nurse of the Year category of the HESTA Australian Nursing Awards.

Nurse of the Year will win \$10,000 in education and travel grants. Other awards are: Innovation in Nursing with a \$10,000 grant to develop their service or program and the Graduate Nurse of the Year who will benefit from \$5,000 in education and travel grants. The prize money is provided by ME Bank, a supporter of the awards since 2008.

The winners will be announced at a gala awards ceremony in Melbourne on Florence Nightingale's birthday – 12 May. Interstate finalists will be flown to Melbourne for the event at Crown Entertainment Complex.

HESTA is one of Australia's largest superannuation funds with more than 700,000 members. It is chosen by more people working in health and community services than any other fund.

Visit hestanursingawards.com to book tickets for the event or learn more about the awards.

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