

Media Release

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Nurse to Sydney's homeless wins top national honour

A nurse who has spent the last four years looking after the homeless people of Sydney has been named the HESTA Australian Nurse of the Year.

Paul Esplin works with rough sleepers in the inner city. Many are living with severe mental illness, developmental delay, intellectual disability, drug and alcohol addiction and/or social isolation.

"It can be hard, but every now and then things work out and you know you've made a difference. People can surprise you. There is hope. It's a very rewarding, unique and interesting way to work," Mr Esplin said.

As The Michael Project Nurse for Medibeat, a program run by Mission Australia in partnership with the St Vincent's Hospital Homeless Health Service, Mr Esplin works with clients on the street, in laneways, parks, drop-in centres and crisis accommodation.

"My car is my office. I am called in by outreach workers and I make my own rounds. Often you start by asking people if they are feeling OK— do they need water or blankets? Do they want to detox? This can open up discussion on particular needs," he said.

His role involves time on the street checking clients' health and ensuring their basic needs are met, through to arranging medical appointments and referrals, guardianship and court matters.

"This sector is a pressure cooker. There are finite resources and huge needs. We have to remember equal access to services is a social justice issue," Mr Esplin said.

"Some of our clients have been homeless for 30 or 40 years. They have very complex needs and organisations don't always know what to do with them. These clients don't have the right forms or fit into services' criteria. Some are illiterate, often without a valid Medicare card, and they need a lot of help to get through this to reach a better, healthier place in their lives.

"But there can be really good outcomes. A long term homeless client recently started a technical course. He has a computer and an iPhone and he is back in education, enjoying life again."

Mr Esplin said some cases could be quickly dealt with, for example families living in cars to escape domestic violence, but most took a long time to resolve.

"Sydney is a tough city for accommodation even when you're working. The priority wait list for the Department of Housing is one year."

Mr Esplin has helped identify missing persons and reconnect them with their families. In one case he was able to reconnect a terminally ill client with family members he hadn't seen for more than 20 years.

"Mental illness plays a huge part in homelessness, as well as drugs and alcohol, but the thread that runs through nearly all the clients is poverty. That's the one common element. I don't know any client who has had good opportunities in life or schooling."

Mr Esplin was presented with \$10,000 in travel and education grants from ME Bank in front of hundreds of his professional peers at the HESTA Australian Nursing Awards. The ceremony coincided with the anniversary of Florence Nightingale's birth.

HESTA CEO Anne-Marie Corboy congratulated the winners and thanked the 480 people who made a nomination in the 2011 awards.

For information visit hestanursingawards.com

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