

# Dr Geoff Thompson: a pioneer in Sport and Exercise Medicine serving First Nations People in Australia's Northern Territory

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Dr Geoff Thompson arrived in the Northern Territory (NT) in November 1971, a move that changed his life forever. The NT is in the north of the Australian continent and is known for its iconic landmarks and ancient Aboriginal culture. The population of the NT is 252 770 and the proportion of the population who are First Nations People is 30%, compared with 3.3% for the remainder of Australia. Geoff's original posting was for 4 years with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), but in December 1974 Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin. This left the town devastated and as a medical officer in the RAAF, Geoff was on duty to manage this devastating natural disaster. This 'duty' went for many months with little rest.

Geoff and his wife Sandy became true Territorians overnight as they developed a love for the NT which 50 years later still holds them to this area of Australia. His story is one of passion, community, friendship, courage and conviction. He has been recognised in all areas, but his contribution to Sport and Exercise Medicine (SEM) and the health of all Territorians, especially the First Nations People, through education and hands on management is well recognised.

## A FLYING SEM PHYSICIAN

Geoff took a position with the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) in 1979. He was both pilot and chief medical officer servicing remote communities in Western Australia, which allowed him to combine his two passions—flying and medicine. He realised at this stage the challenges of providing adequate medical care in remote First Nation communities

and was driven by a desire to prevent the complex medical conditions he saw too frequently, many the result of chronic disease.

Geoff commenced his dream to become a sport and exercise physician by studying with the Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians (ACSEP), whilst working as a Flying Doctor (literally!) with the RFDS. In 1984, together with a physiotherapist colleague, he led the establishment of the NT branch of the Australian Sports Medicine Federation (renamed as Sports Medicine Australia). He also established regional networks with the major centres in the NT—Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs from 1986.

## BRINGING SEM TO FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

Geoff opened The Thompson Medical Practice in Darwin in 1980. He took Tuesdays 'off' to fly his plane to remote communities in Arnhem Land, working primarily as a general practitioner, but with a focus on SEM and promoting healthy lifestyles (figure 1). These communities are the homelands of the First Nations Yolngu people. The population in Arnhem Land is small and the communities are many kilometres from medical services. In the wet they are completely cut-off from access by road. His small plane was an exciting and welcome sight. Queues grew as word spread that the Doctor had arrived. Aboriginal people got an introduction to SEM and learnt that injuries could be fixed. Many budding Australian Rules Footballers were thrilled to discover that with correct management of injuries such as sprained joints, strained muscles, dislocations and even broken bones, they could optimise their potential in the game they love.

Participation in sport is incredibly important to First Nations people and is embedded into their sense of community and their culture, with proven benefits

to health, discipline, respect, friendship, lifestyle and fun. Geoff identified the real difficulties rural & remote communities face in accessing SEM Specialist care. He also knew the relationship between exercise and optimum physical and mental health and understood how best to share this message with First Nations people. He educated people during his remote clinic visits and continues to do so.

## RECOGNITION OF OUTSTANDING SERVICE TO SEM

In 1986, the NT Government held the first Australian Masters Games in Alice Springs, the 'Friendly Games'. Masters sport has an underlying belief that each participant is a champion as they had maintained optimum physical health and activity through life. Dr Geoff was at the helm of SEM services at the Games from their inception (figure 1). Geoff ensured that SEM was recognised as a vital contributor to the Games and the Sports Medicine team marched with the athletes at the opening and closing ceremonies. He became an expert in running multidisciplinary sports clinics over 40+ years and is proud to have worked at Olympic, Paralympic, Commonwealth, Arafura and Australian University games, and has also been the Doctor for Australian Men's Hockey.

As Geoff's knowledge and passion for SEM grew over the years, he continued



**Figure 1** Dr Geoff Thompson providing outreach medical services with his plane and makeshift 'ute' ambulance and together with his wife Sandy at the Central Australian Masters Games

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to educate Territorians collaboratively with Australian Physiotherapy Association Sport and Exercise Physiotherapists. His thirst for knowledge was supported by research as the discipline of SEM became the evidence-based specialty that is recognised today by the ACSEP. In 1990, Geoff was awarded an inaugural Fellowship to the ACSEP.

In 2020, Geoff's extensive work in SEM delivery was recognised as the NT Australian of the year. He was recognised in the Queens Birthday honours with a

Member of the Order of Australia (ABM) in 2021. Geoff, we thank you for your incredible service to SEM!

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