A rural GP in Victoria's Macedon Ranges, Dr Paul Carter knew he wanted to practise medicine from a young age. A tragic loss during his childhood motivated him to pursue a career that would allow him to help those most in need.

"When I was a small child, my brother unexpectedly died and I definitely think my interest in medicine dated from around that time," he said. "It didn’t feel conscious at that time, I think that came later, but I knew from about the age of 10 that all I wanted to do was medicine and I was very focused on doing that."

UK-born Carter completed his medical education and trained as a pathologist in London before a prospect ‘too good to pass up’ led him to Australia.

"I was offered the opportunity to come out and join the pathology staff at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1976 and I came out here on a six-month exchange," he said. "The actual truth is that I did a ‘Shirley Valentine’ and I never went home."

Carter spent the next few years of his Australian life looking down a microscope, even establishing his own successful private pathology practice.

"In 1986 I realised that I was really fed up with pathology and I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life looking at slides. I actually wanted to spend my life with real life patients who answered back and that is why I decided to get into general practice," he said.

"It has been the most wonderful career change and I absolutely, thoroughly love my professional life. It is a decision that I have never regretted for one second."

Carter was born and raised in the small village of Warwickshire, in the West Midlands region of England. He always envisaged himself living in the countryside, away from the busy streets of London or his adopted hometown of Melbourne.

"I eventually gave up the city and pathology and bought a property in the Macedon Ranges, about an hour north of Melbourne, and joined with the local GP there in Romsey," he said. "I really got plunged into this world of rural general practice and it was very much like jumping in the deep end.

"The combination of countryside and medicine is perfect for me."

Carter’s first taste of rural general practice came in the small Victorian community of Euroa, 150 km north-east of Melbourne.

"My private pathology practice was bought out and I was at a little bit of a loose end when I was offered by a friend to locum for him," he explained. "I knew it was going to be really challenging. I went up there for three weeks and absolutely fell in love with the work I was doing and with the people in the community.

Paul Carter’s belief in not judging patients has helped shape and inspire his general practice and literary careers.
‘I just knew then that [rural general practice] was something I really wanted to do for the rest of my life.’

**Reciprocal care**

Like many rural GPs in Australia, Carter believes in the intrinsic link between a general practice and the community it serves.

‘I have been very fortunate with the community that I came into,’ he said. ‘It is a community that I am still very much a part of and I have been here now for 28 years. I wouldn’t dream of going back to the city.’

Carter and Dr Marina Kefford established Lancefield Country Practice in 2009 after the Macedon Ranges township of Lancefield was without a medical centre for 18 months. Carter has since moved to a part-time role that involves mentoring the next generation of GPs.

‘I have managed to get four young doctors who work with me because I am a lot slacker than I used to be and just work three days a week. Three big days, I must say,’ he said.

The practice serves more than 4500 patients in the Macedon Ranges catchment and provides emergency stabilisation for acute patients.

‘[Lancefield Country Practice] was the recipient of the Federal Government grant with which we were able to build a state-of-the-art emergency room,’ Carter said.

‘One of the areas that I am personally interested in is emergency medicine, in terms of stabilising patients for transfer. We see a lot of horse, tractor and chainsaw accidents,’ Lancefield Country Practice’s statement of purpose – ‘toward a healthier, healthier community’ – is something Carter adheres to in his daily working life.

‘It is absolutely vital to have that engagement with your community when you are out in the country,’ he said. ‘I have been a part of the community now to a point where there is an endless stream of involvement in birthdays, anniversaries, weddings and funerals.

‘At a practice and personal level, there is total engagement with the community that we are in and I couldn’t imagine my life now without that.’

Carter’s efforts for the people in his community have spurred them to return the favour in times of need.

‘Through overworking, I fell ill for a while and I learnt the doctor–patient relationship is not one way. It really is reciprocated,’ he said. ‘Inasmuch as I have looked after [the community] all these years, they all rallied and looked after me. They were very much part of me recovering and getting better and getting back in the saddle.

‘One is told that you have to keep your personal life and your professional life quite separate. But the truth is, in a small rural community that is not possible.’

**Pen to paper**

Another of Carter’s passions lies in writing. After almost three decades in rural general practice, he has penned two books about his experiences and he is currently working on a third.

‘Through the richness of my experience with all of these wonderful characters I have met since I moved up here, I have all these stories in my head,’ he said. ‘I went over to Lord Howe Island [New South Wales] once for locum work during winter and the weather was so vile you could hardly step outside the clinic.

‘I had my laptop with me and since I couldn’t go out I sat down and thought I would write a story. From that, it gradually grew into the first book and then the second.’

Carter’s next book will follow the same theme around what his patients have taught him, but will focus on one particular patient and her struggles.

‘Quite a few years ago now, I got a call on Christmas morning where a child said, “Mummy is not well”. I ran off to the house and Mum was lying absolutely comatose with two children and there was no food in the house, there was no Christmas tree and no presents or decorations,’ he said.

‘The book is going to be about her and how easy would it be to judge her for doing that.

‘In fact, if you knew the story that led up to that, instead of being cross with her you will feel sympathetic.’

Carter’s writing follows his deep regard and respect for every one of his patients, something he believes is the foundation of general practice.

‘I really wanted to tell stories of my patients because we shouldn’t judge someone based on their circumstances,’ he said. ‘That is how I see general practice. It is never our job to judge the patients who come to seek our help.

‘It really encapsulates my whole philosophy.’

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