I had never heard of Rheumatic Heart Disease until I worked there. As a child I remember some of my old people in Goodooga talking about someone passing away because they had "a big heart" but as a child I thought that meant they were very loving – no-one mentioned the words Rheumatic Heart Disease. But every time I had a sore I remember the old people getting the Dettol out and washing it then putting ointment and a bandage on. And they used to look at our legs all the time – if we had a ring around our leg from the socks they'd say we've got to be careful because something isn't right.

I received a very big shock when I moved to a small community in Central Australia – I'd only been there a week and a young girl passed away after just giving birth 3 months earlier. I started to ask around and couldn't get any information about what had killed her, until I worked with her Uncle who told me it was Rheumatic Heart Disease and that she first had Rheumatic Fever as a young girl and had several episodes through her life.

Then my partner was working with a group of women to train them for employment that interested them. One young woman (about 23 years of age) was having difficulty deciding what she might be interested in so my partner asked her what she saw herself doing in 5 years time. She said it didn't matter because she would be dead by then.

Again it was hard to get information about why she would die. It wasn't until the music teacher's wife contracted Rheumatic Fever that I learnt more. She talked to me about what had caused it and the treatment she was given. She had contracted Strep Throat, was offered anti-biotics but refused them and a few days later was diagnosed with Rheumatic Fever. She was told that if she'd taken the anti-biotics when they were first offered she wouldn't have contracted the fever. She was given a treatment of anti-biotics and told to leave Central Australia because if she got it again it would further damage her heart. She was also told that there was a bug in the ground, particularly prevalent in Central Australia that caused the disease – this was not true.

I began to discuss this with community members and discovered that they were given very little information about Rheumatic Fever or Rheumatic Heart Disease and virtually no information about the relatively simple prevention actions they could take to reduce the risk, even though a lot of people had it. I also realised that, unlike my white friend, they were often not offered anti-biotics at the Strep throat stage – again a very simple action which could have been taken by the medical staff. I wanted to find information that I could give to the community but there was nothing around. Even at the school, young kids were running around in the dirt, with skin sores and the teachers did not know they should be treated.

That's why I was so interested when Ken started talking about what he was doing with St. Vincent's Hospital and introduced me to Tamra. That's how the painting was created – from the information he and Tamra gave me. I started to learn that Rheumatic Fever is not a death sentence like I was told by the young lady in Central Australia – that if the right treatment and education is offered people can live a long, normal life.

There were other consequences for the lack of information in that community. Because, when people think they have a death sentence, they live life to the fullest. That young girl my partner talked to didn't plan anything for her life, she didn't plan to have children, she just had a really good time. And probably added to her health problems.

But I believe when you give people information about this disease they can plan for a long life and they can do small things to prevent their children ever getting Rheumatic Fever or Rheumatic Heart Disease. I hope this painting can add to the information for those communities – that its journey does not end here in Sydney but goes on to be shown in Aboriginal communities, particularly in Central Australia so we can stop these needless deaths of our young people.

Tex Skuthorpe