

Robyn Williams: Kim Boyer is an experienced health researcher and academic from Tasmania who has been closely involved with the National Health & Medical Research Council, including on committees relating to strategic research initiatives, palliative care, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research—come to talk to us on the demise of the Geebung Polo Club: a failure in health services planning? Welcome.

## The demise of the Geebung Polo Club: a failure in health services planning?

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Thanks, Robyn. And wasn't that a fantastic welcome to country. I feel so welcomed and so humble to be part of this wonderful conference with its fantastic opening. Now, that introduction of me actually isn't quite about the Geebung Polo Club, because in my spare time, of which there is not much, I try to write the odd bit of travel literature and poetry, so you're being a victim of that this afternoon. While searching for a poem to actually complement another conference paper I was preparing, I chanced upon an old friend; A.B.(or Banjo) Patterson's romping and iconic poem, which has entertained countless generations of Australians who delight in the bush versus city paradigm. Just in case you're too young to know what I'm talking about—Robyn, you should be about the right age—here it is:

*It was somewhere up the country, in a land of rock and scrub,  
That they formed an institution called the Geebung Polo Club.  
They were long and wiry natives from the rugged mountainside,  
And the horse was never saddled that the Geebungs couldn't ride;  
And their style of playing polo was irregular and rash —  
They had mighty little science, but a mighty lot of dash:  
And they played on mountain ponies that were muscular and strong,  
Though their coats were quite unpolished,*

*and their manes and tails were long.  
And they used to train those ponies wheeling cattle in the scrub:  
They were demons, were the members of the Geebung Polo Club.*

*It was somewhere down the country, in a city's smoke and steam,  
That a polo club existed, called the Cuff and Collar Team.  
As a social institution 'twas a marvellous success,  
For its members were distinguished by exclusiveness and dress.  
They had natty little ponies that were nice, and smooth, and sleek,  
For their cultivated owners only rode 'em once a week.  
So they started up the country in pursuit of sport and fame,  
For they meant to show the Geebungs how they ought to play the game;  
And they took their valets with them — just to give their boots a rub  
Ere they started operations on the Geebung Polo Club.*

*Now my listeners can imagine how the contest ebbed and flowed,  
When the Geebung boys got going it was time to clear the road;  
And the game was so terrific that ere half the time was gone  
A spectator's leg was broken — just from merely looking on.*

*For they waddied one another till the plain was strewn with dead,  
And the score was kept so even that they neither got ahead.  
And the Cuff and Collar Captain, when he tumbled off to die,  
Was the last surviving player — so the game was called a tie.*

*Now the Captain of the Geebungs raised him slowly from the ground,  
Though his wounds were mostly mortal, yet he fiercely gazed around;  
There was no one to oppose him — all the rest were in a trance,  
So he scrambled on his pony for the last expiring chance,  
For he meant to make an effort to get victory to his side;  
And he struck at goal — and missed it — then he tumbled off and died.*

*By the old Campaspe River, where the breezes shake the grass,  
There's a row of little gravestones that the stockmen never pass,  
For they bear a crude inscription saying, 'Stranger, drop a tear,  
For the Cuff and Collar players and the Geebung boys lie here.'  
And on misty moonlit evenings, while the dingoes howl around,  
You can see the phantoms flitting down that phantom polo ground;  
You can hear the loud collisions as the flying players meet,  
And the rattle of the mallets, and the rush of ponies' feet,  
Till the terrified spectator rides like blazes to the pub —  
He's been haunted by the spectres of the Geebung Polo Club.*

So contemplating the events of the century past, I pondered: would this grievous morbidity and mortality and these outcomes have been quite so grim, had there been some trusty service planning in place? Was the carnage at Geebung preventable with proper service planning, with health promotion, and injury prevention? So, with apologies to Banjo and to any polo players among you, here's a new version of the poem I have penned set in 2009, with a somewhat different aftermath.

*It was somewhere up the country, where drought and fire are rife,  
And alternate floods and storm clouds are a normal part of life.  
Here athletic working riders from Geebung farms and stations,  
Trained their wiry polo ponies in their mustering locations.  
Their style of playing polo was still irregular and rash;  
They had mighty little science and a mighty lot of dash.  
But these rural men and women liked to party hard as well,  
When the wool clip and the harvest gave the budget a small swell.  
And they had their strong supporters in the local pubs and clubs;  
Their health centre staff and colleagues obliged with pills and rubs.*

*It was somewhere in suburbia, amid the city smog and steam,  
That another club existed, called the Cuff and Collar Team.  
They had strings of natty ponies, their supporters dressed to kill,  
The club was very wealthy with canapés and Bollinger to swill.  
So they started up to Geebung in search of sport and fame,  
For they meant too to show the Geebungs how they ought to play the game.  
And they took their physio with them, just to give their legs a rub,  
Ere they started operation on the Geebung Polo Club.*

*Now the Geebung health professionals, when they heard the game was planned,  
Went into tactical huddle to ensure resources were on hand.  
They made their risk assessments, called in staff and volunteer,  
Paramedics, nurses, GP, district orthopod and gear.  
For they understood the rivalries and challenges of the game.  
Even with the planning, there was trepidation all the same.*

*The whistle blew, the teams faced up, the contest ebbed and flowed,  
When the Geebung team got going, it was time to clear the road.  
And the pace was so terrific, that when chukka one was gone,  
Two players' limbs were broken and half the team were done.  
By chukka three, the players thinned; bruised, battered and so sore,  
And yet, despite their efforts wild, they all had failed to score.  
The health team had their hands full, the physio massaged the maimed,  
But the captains vowed to strike again, as one more turn remained.*

*Alone, the Geebung skipper, a woman of great skill  
And fine and feisty character, made a strike at goal at will  
But that handsome city captain interposed mallet in the lime,  
Then his final shot went wide and the umpire called out "Time".*

*On the sidelines the crowd went wild, the champagne ebbed and flowed,  
And the captains joined the health team with the players who had rode,  
But the physio had eyes alone for the Geebung captain fair,  
He offered his services gratis in his mobile massage chair.  
And the Cuff and Collar captain, when he tumbled to the ground,  
Found the nurse practitioner by his side, to ensure that he was sound.*

*Now on misty moonlit evenings, while the dingoes howl around,  
No more the clash of mallets on the lonely polo ground.  
Instead laughter and warm embrace within the local pub,  
For two new health team staff have joined the Geebung Club.  
The Cuff and Collar physio augments the local crew.  
Life with the Geebung captain has been a great to do.  
And the city polo captain, an expert in alcohol and drugs,  
Has joined the nurse practitioner, with kisses and with hugs.*

*And the crafty health team leader has a smile into beer,  
He's got a new recruitment strategy for those policy bods to hear;  
"Forget reform agendas, forget a workforce plan,  
A fierce game of polo has got it in the can.  
Just get the skills and gender right before they take the field,  
And with friendly bush community, the townies have to yield."*

*Apologies to Banjo, but he'd probably have a grin,  
To know his Geebung polos have hit Cairns with a win.*

## Presenter

**Kim Boyer** is a former senior health bureaucrat who now works part time in rural health research, in addition to roles on a range of boards and committees in education, youth health and disadvantage. Her research focus is on team building across disciplines and between researchers and policy makers and service deliverers, particularly in the area of healthy ageing in rural communities. She has had extensive experience as a strategic research leader at NHMRC. She writes in her spare time.

