



22 Jun 2019  
Courier Mail, Brisbane



Author: Matthew Condon • Section: Qweekend • Article Type: News Item  
Audience : 166,502 • Page: 12 • Printed size: 1593.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Region: QLD  
Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 42,412 • words: 1792 • Item ID: 1134381874

[isentia.mediaportal](https://www.isentia.com.au/mediaportal)

Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence.

Page 1 of 4



# Remote access first aid

This dynamic duo faces an emergency - helping to save lives in Mongolia. Now they're calling for crisis support

MATTHEW CONDON



22 Jun 2019

Courier Mail, Brisbane

Author: Matthew Condon • Section: Qweekend • Article Type: News Item  
Audience : 166,502 • Page: 12 • Printed size: 1593.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Region: QLD  
Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 42,412 • words: 1792 • Item ID: 1134381874

 isentia mediaportal

Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence.

In the world, there are sometimes unlikely stories, and this is one of them. It is a tale of two men who met in unlikely circumstances, even though they worked for the same employer and had never run across each other. And it is about how that unlikely coupling led to these two men achieving something remarkable in the most unlikely of places.

This, then, is the story of Hamish McLean, 58, a senior lecturer at Griffith University's School of Humanities in Brisbane, and Duncan McConnell, 41, a paramedic and senior lecturer at Griffith's School of Medicine.

McLean is tall and bearded and garrulous, with a big laugh. McConnell is shorter and immaculately groomed and contained with a moderate, -neat-ish laugh.

McLean was born and raised in New Zealand and worked as a journalist and public relations executive in Australia before turning to academia. McConnell was in the military (and had a grandfather who served as a medic during World War II) before he trained with the Queensland Ambulance Service as a paramedic. He later helped design the course for paramedic studies at Griffith.

McLean had been fascinated by emergency services since he was a teenager. Wherever he worked as a journalist – be it in New Zealand or South Australia or Warwick, southwest of Brisbane – he always volunteered to help out the local ambulance service or firefighting outfits. He became an expert in emergency and crisis management.

"I was invited to do a guest lecture for a leadership course involving delegates from throughout Asia ... I did it on crisis communication," says McLean.

"Afterwards I was approached by one of the delegates who said she was from Mongolia, and afterwards she asked would I be able to help her.

"She explained she was a paediatrician in charge of the ambulance service in Mongolia and that they were in dire straits, they needed some help, some training and so on.

"She relayed the story of how she and her mother were involved in a car accident in Mongolia. The vehicle rolled and her mother suffered spinal injuries, and the only vehicle they had to use as an ambulance was an old Russian Jeep.

"There was no equipment for the mother, they sat her up in the vehicle, all those sorts of things ... and that got me thinking."

On his way back to Australia after a trip through Europe, McLean found himself on a stopover in Seoul, South Korea. It was then he had an idea.

"I emailed the paediatrician and said I might pop over to Mongolia," McLean recalls. "I asked her if she'd like me to do a little workshop on

leadership and disasters, something like that, and she said sure ... I arrived in the capital (Ulaanbaatar) and found out I was addressing a two-day workshop for 200 delegates from across the country, talking about leadership and disasters ..." (The mini-seminar was arranged by the World Health Organisation.)

It was January 2017.

McLean was given a whistlestop tour of some of the provinces of Mongolia.

"It was up to -40C in the winter, I was taken up to northern Mongolia to see what it was like with snow and freezing conditions and I went and saw the herdspeople and those sorts of things.

"I got to thinking that these people really

needed help to set up some sort of ambulance or paramedic system and I wondered what I could do so I spent a lot of time pondering ... how can I find a person who can train these people? Who understands the cultural differences? Who is a paramedic and is experienced?

"I couldn't just ring up the QAS and ask them if they could send a paramedic to Mongolia, one who understands all these sensitivities. I came back to Brisbane and did a presentation to a couple of people at Griffith University and McConnell's name was mentioned to me ...."

The two men met and McLean explained his thoughts and ambitions for this still amorphous idea.

"I showed McConnell the photographs of the old Russian jeeps and the equipment in the emergency rooms ... I was interested in hearing what he had to say, thinking it would cost a fortune," McLean says.

"But he started talking in very practical terms, that they should be using belts as tourniquets, or they should be using this to do that.

"He looked at the vehicles and said, 'Oh yeah, we could probably convert them and put stretchers in them'. It was really practical stuff, and we sort of clicked. From that point we thought – let's go to Mongolia and let's do stuff."

It was the unlikeliest of scenarios; two academics from subtropical Brisbane, working hard to improve medical emergency structures in a country like Mongolia, the most sparsely populated sovereign state on the planet with only three million people, landlocked with Russia to the north and China to the south, and 9600km away from the Queensland capital.

## READY TO IMPROVISE

McConnell, who'd done similar on-the-ground training in the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean, jumped into the project.

"(In Mongolia) they had ambulance vehicles, which had oxygen, some had defibrillators, they





22 Jun 2019

Courier Mail, Brisbane

Author: Matthew Condon • Section: Qweekend • Article Type: News Item  
Audience : 166,502 • Page: 12 • Printed size: 1593.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Region: QLD  
Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 42,412 • words: 1792 • Item ID: 1134381874

 isentia mediaportal

Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence.

all had a stretcher, like a foldable one, and that was about it, equipment-wise,” says McConnell.

“Some areas had more than that. Ventilator machines, splints of various kinds, tourniquets, and whatnot, but it was very mismatched, even within a province let alone compared to other provinces. There was no standardisation, no uniformity, and that was just with equipment. Training was similar.

“There was nothing really in place to assist these doctors in managing the pre-hospital response, not just to trauma but other medical emergencies as well.

“Medical emergencies are medical emergencies, no matter which part of the world you’re in, but providing care for people outside a hospital environment, in a pre-hospital environment, is a lot different. It’s not controlled. Things change by the second. And you need to be able to adapt and overcome the changes as required.

“So going back to McLean’s original questions, my response was we could implement a system, but it would fall over immediately because they didn’t have the infrastructure in place to support it, and what we really needed to do was to go back to basics, establish the foundations, get the foundations rock solid, and then we could build off that.”

Ambitious. Possibly unlikely.

But the two academics returned to Mongolia last year and started building those foundations. They took as much new medical equipment as they could carry, and/or afford, given excess baggage charges.

McConnell was impressed by the spirit of the Mongolians and saw possibilities.

“It wasn’t about going over there and selling them millions of dollars of equipment,” he says. “It was about working with them, finding out their needs, and training them to facilitate the sustainability of ongoing development and improvement within their own country.

“They live in that country. They know what they need. We can just provide the guidance and

the training and the initial foundation steps they need to get going.

“They’re quite a proud people. They’re quite innovative. The one thing I did notice about what little equipment they did have, they knew how to innovate and come up with alternate ideas of using things that over here some people would struggle with.”

The available equipment and training standards were another matter altogether. It became a matter of returning to square one. Implementing correct trauma management. Using tourniquets for catastrophic haemorrhaging. Keeping patients warm. Positioning them correctly after an accident. Simple strategies that didn’t require a lot of equipment.

McLean found last year’s trip “overwhelming”.

“They were so hospitable,” he says. “They took us to a traditional family and they were singing ... all the doctors with us were singing traditional songs ... they took us horse riding and taught us archery ... they were so appreciative that we were there to help and not sell them stuff.”

McConnell trained more than 100 doctors during their visit. “And we’re still getting emails from various provinces with photographs of their ambulances wondering if McConnell could come next time and help with them,” McLean adds. “This training has spread through the grapevine throughout Mongolia, so that’s a great thing. They’re really keen to learn.

“On a government level, there’s a rapid turn-over in their ministry, and of political leaders, so for us it’s a challenge. By accident we’ve become an international aid agency of two, without any resources, and it’s been a steep learning curve.”

McConnell’s aim is to train Mongolian people in basic paramedic skills, so they go on to train other people, until Mongolia’s emergency management system, in terms of quality, matches others around the world. But it’s one small step at a time.

“There’s no point in going over there and trying to implement X, Y and Z if they don’t have the sustainability and the capability to continue with it because it’s a waste of time, and you’re wasting everyone’s money.

“We’re looking at what we can provide and I guess that’s what they like about our approach. It’s being done in a sustainable manner that fits the needs of the country without the hard sell.”

In another way, McLean was lucky he met the unlikely McConnell. While in Mongolia last year, McLean had a medical emergency that required him to be helicoptered from a small village to Ulaanbaatar. He was fine, in the end, but having an experienced paramedic on hand in the wilds of Mongolia didn’t hurt.

Griffith University provided some seed money for those initial trips, and continues to be extremely supportive. But the dynamic duo is in desperate need of sponsorship to fully implement their dreams for Mongolia. Their work has already saved lives in their adopted country. The experience has changed both men and their view of their work, and indeed the world.

“When I was taking 000 calls in Gisborne (New Zealand) as an 18-year-old,” says McLean, “with no training and people ringing up to say there’d been an accident, or whatever, I never thought I’d later have a PhD, be working at a university in Queensland, going to Mongolia with a paramedic and doing all this sort of wonderful work. It never occurred to me. But that’s life.”

Unlikely? Not in the least. ■



**“By accident  
we’ve  
become an  
international  
aid agency  
of two,  
without any  
resources”**



22 Jun 2019  
Courier Mail, Brisbane

Author: Matthew Condon • Section: Qweekend • Article Type: News Item  
Audience : 166,502 • Page: 12 • Printed size: 1593.00cm<sup>2</sup> • Region: QLD  
Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 42,412 • words: 1792 • Item ID: 1134381874

 isentia.mediaportal

Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence.



**HANDS ON:** Griffith University lecturers Duncan McConnell and Hamish McLean are training Mongolian people in basic paramedic skills; locals such as this boy (*left*) from the nomadic Tsaatan tribe live in harsh conditions. **Picture:** (*above*) Liam Kidston