

BreastScreen Australia

BRINGING MAMMOGRAPHY SERVICES TO THE BUSH

Breast cancer is the second most common cause of cancer-related death in Australian women. In 2007 alone, 2680 Australian women died from breast cancer. In 1990, health ministers from each state and territory in Australia agreed to jointly fund a national mammography screening programme. The Early Detection of Breast Cancer, later shortened to BreastScreen Australia, was developed in 1991 and is now recognised globally as one of the most comprehensive population-based screening programmes. BreastScreen Australia aim to provide all Australian women, within the 50–69 age group, a free breast screen every two years through the use of fixed, relocatable and mobile screening units. With over 500 locations nationwide, screening has significantly increased since its establishment in 1991.

BreastScreen Australia provides mobile and relocatable services intended to support rural and remote communities. Most Australian states and territories have largely remote communities and vast distances to travel between them. Because of this, buses and trailers have been specially fitted with digital and analogue mammographic units that can travel great lengths to regional towns to provide women in the communities with the same breast screens so readily available in the larger cities.

Each state and territory maintains its own co-ordination unit to plan and organise where and when each mobile unit performs the screenings. Mobile breast screening is co-ordinated on a two-year cycle and requires an incredible amount of precision, census data, site visits and great lengths of organisation. Co-ordination units play a large role in the recruitment of women, often sending invitations to book appointments and in some states, providing information and contact details on permanent BreastScreen cards.

BreastScreen at a glance

1/11 is the risk of women developing breast cancer before 75
50 weeks a year
500 locations nation wide
2680 women died from breast cancer in 2007
1,641,316 women over 40 were screened in 2007 and 2008

Primary responsibility of implementation of the program is that of the state and territory governments. All BreastScreen Australia services must be accredited and follow the national standards and national accreditation process established by the Australian Government.

The mobile and relocatable BreastScreen units travel each state and territory on a two-year cycle with the radiographers and clerical staff having to spend copious amounts of time away from home and family. This sort of commitment to work requires a special type of person, radiographers working on the mobiles and relocatable units demonstrate exceptional qualities that are difficult to quantify. Not only do they have to consistently produce mammograms of high diagnostic quality including work up views as required and work in isolation with minimal supervision, they need to be prepared for the unexpected. Radiographers become very useful with a screwdriver, often fixing equipment while talking to a service engineer many kilometres away.

Northern Territory

The entire Northern Territory is considered rural under Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC). Though they do not currently have a mobile unit, they do have a “relocatable service”. This equipment is cased, and then transported to regional towns such as





Prue Heart

Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Nhulunbuy where it is set up for a block of screening. Remote women are encouraged to make appointments or “drop-in” and have a free breast screen.

Queensland pioneered this method of an x-ray machine that folds and can be transported in a specially designed case. NT has copied this method and use it to provide the breast screening service to women who could not readily access this service any other way.

Western Australia

Western Australia covers an area of 2,525,500 km² (33% of Australia) and has a population of 2.2 million, 1.7 million of whom live in the Perth metropolitan area. BreastScreen WA (BSWA) has four mobile units that travel the west state delivering the breast screening service to eligible women in the rural and remote regions including the isolated aboriginal communities.

The mobile units weigh 16 tonnes, measure 12.5 x 4.2 x 2.5 m and require power, water and waste disposal. They are moved by a prime mover and must travel on sealed roads.

The mobiles visit 98 towns every two years, the furthest destination being Wyndham in the North West (3212 km from Perth), which is



almost same distance from Perth to Melbourne. The length of each the visit can vary from three days to several months.

The women also travel considerable distances to access the service. Women from the Lands travel three days, camping along the way, to be screened at Laverton, North East of Kalgoorlie. Women from Kalumbaru are flown to Wyndham as there is no road between.

Some of the more memorable moments aboard the mobile unit include; moving out of the path of cyclone Iggy, surviving extreme floods, shooing feral cats from the external storage lockers and correcting the mobile unit after vandals wound up one of the support legs, leaving the unit twisted and leaning over. Apart from this, the staff onboard these units have the opportunity to become part of the local communities and visit some amazing places that WA has to offer including beautiful wine regions, majestic old growth forests, spectacular coastal scenery, beautiful Broome sunsets, magnificent Pilbarra and Kimberley to name a few...

The existing units have served us well over the past 20 odd years but it is time to move on and throughout 2012 the units will be replaced with new mobiles equipped with full field digital mammography (FFDM).

South Australia

Mobile screening units are not a new concept in providing breast screening services closer to home for Australian women living in outer metro and rural areas – in fact, they’ve been around since the early 90s, ranging in form from buses to semi-trailers. But with the era of digital mammography now upon us, creating a mobile clinic setting that can



WA trailer

not only house a digital mammography unit, but can also be comfortable, aesthetically pleasing and so encourage women to attend, is a challenge many breast screening services are facing.

Luckily for BreastScreen SA (BSSA), 2010 saw the launch of two new, state-of-the-art mobile screening units to replace the existing two, country mobile screening units that had been in operation since 1992 and 1995 respectively. Both new mobile units are now providing services to approximately 33,000 women at 26 locations across rural and remote South Australia (SA).

The mobile screening units were the first of BSSA's clinics to "come online" with digital equipment, giving the radiographers on board the exciting opportunity to work with

Sectra's Full Field Digital Mammography technology.

"It certainly was an exciting time," BSSA mobile radiographer, Prue Hart, says.

"I was all set to retire at the end of 2010, but when the new units arrived, I decided to stay working so I could experience using the new digital equipment – it is wonderful."

Manufactured by Varley Specialised Vehicles in NSW, the mobile units were custom-designed to ensure the safety and comfort of clients, staff, and transport and site contractors. Their stylish interior and striking exterior design was the result of collective input from BSSA staff, interior designers and women living in regional SA. The units now boast a generous sized mammography room and change room,


curb-side wheelchair lift for disability access, a compact and comfortable reception area and waiting room for up to five clients, and a staff amenities room with full kitchen facilities. The genius is that all of this fits within the confines of a semi-trailer.

The units travel as far north as Marla in the state's outback, to Ceduna on the west coast, Berri in the eastern Riverland, Kingscote on Kangaroo Island and Mount Gambier in the state's southeast. Given the diverse locations, consideration was also needed for the environmental conditions the staff and digital mammography equipment would face. To ensure the comfort of staff and clients and the protection of the equipment, the mobile screening units house three separate, high-performance air conditioning systems that provide optimal temperatures for both comfort and operational requirements.

Add in an automatic sliding door, fully automated retractable awnings, electric and hydraulic stabilising equipment, a monitored alarm, and plenty of external locker space, these blue beauties rival any fixed-clinic setting.

"When you're travelling around as much as we do, it's great to know you're doing it in style. And the women absolutely love them – they're a real statement," Prue says.

"I've been a radiographer on the mobiles [both old and new] for almost 14 years now, and I couldn't think of a better place work. It's lovely."

"There is lots of travelling and living away from home, but getting to see and stay in so many different locations, and working with the rural women of SA, from ocean to outback, it's all been more than worth it," Prue says. 

If you would like to know more about BreastScreen Australia or book an appointment please call 132050.