

## Lismore, floods, and renewal

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The library at Lismore Base Hospital dates back to the late 1980s, housed in a room near the nursing quarters and above the psychiatric ward. Cathie Nilon was the librarian from 1989 and as specialists and departments moved out of the building, the library took over the space to grow the collection and create a computer room. The library was a disjointed layout with divided collections and, like a lot of hospital buildings, had a definite lean in some areas where the original verandah had been built in to create rooms.

Whilst the location overlooking the pool seemed ideal, it was too far from the biggest user groups and the activity of the main hospital, down the end of a long, winding corridor. In early 2021 the main door was blocked off and the corridor used as a Covid-19 clinic, meaning staff could only access the library from the pool gate (which refused to open in humid/wet weather or staff couldn't use the keypad – was annoying for most people who eventually gave up).

When I was offered a 12-month contract to cover Cathie's long service leave, I imagined a quiet year of adventuring though the Northern Rivers, boosting my CV with a library manager stint and basically keeping her seat warm. How wrong I was. On arrival Cathie informed me the other Librarian was retiring so I would be recruiting and then I would be moving the library in 6 months and there may be an opportunity for a full-time position. What do they say about the best laid plans???

I had no internet/email/computer access for a couple of weeks, so I concentrated on the relocation plans. Over 3 decades of historical papers and artefacts (including microfiche, floppy discs, card catalogue and community receipts of \$1 and \$2 that helped build the original collection). The microfiche found a new home at Westmead Hospital and boxes of surplus stationery was sent to the Executive Office to be used by the Disaster Management Response team – little did we know how quickly it would be needed.

Cathie had deliberately kept the print journals and books on the shelves to give the impression we needed the space and left a list of material to be discarded just before moving. This was important in protecting the library space as even during the new library final inspection, various departments wanted to take over our workroom and training spaces.

Due to Covid-19 outbreaks and building defects the relocation date was continuously pushed back, and then on February 28, 2022, the first of two floods happened.

The flood photo (below) is looking toward North and South Lismore with the hospital site in the foreground and the shopping centre in the middle, the river in the background. Over 3000 homes were damaged within the district and the hospital lost around 60 fleet vehicles, the Breast-Screen bus as well as many community health buildings, specialist offices and houses.

Some of our staff were homeless, either living in cars, with family or friends or initially sleeping in quiet spaces within the hospital because they couldn't get home. I and my colleague were not affected by the flood (although I would soon be evicted) but we were blocked off from accessing Lismore for 4 days until the roads were opened. Melissa and her family checked on the welfare of vulnerable community members in their area and I joined a clean-up crew in Ballina, walking into houses with a garden hose and broom to clean out the sludge and debris. I have spoken to a few librarians from around the country who came to help with the clean-up and recovery, which was very much appreciated.

Construction in Lismore was directed to emergency work, the priority being any establishment that could provide accommodation, which meant the library relocation date moved back again. The delay meant we could rethink how the new library could provide staff with a relaxing space to sit, de-stress, or sleep. The community was on edge, particularly as a month later the second flood occurred.

Finally, Quantum Libraries arrived to set up our shelving, and returned 2 weeks later in mid-June to move our collections. We started at 5pm and put the last journals on the shelves at midnight. Photos included with the article show the soundproofed computer room, the sunset as we moved the books in and the Information Pod and shelving featuring Indigenous artwork from a local artist.

The library opened at 8am the following morning with tours and lots of visitors. Our foot traffic, book loans and memberships have increased dramatically in the last 12 months, the booths and study area are used quite often. The library may change in how we use our space but we feel the staff have really appreciated having a quiet space in an otherwise hectic environment.











