

AFR BOSS | Best Places to Work

Where social purpose, profits happily co-exist

Mosul was the war zone no one dared to enter. Seized in 2014 by Islamic State militia, the Iraqi city was in ruins. Civilian casualties were appalling, yet neither the UN nor NGOs were able to re-establish a hospital in Mosul's bombed-out western suburbs.

It took a private Australian company to put an arm around the few doctors and nurses who remained.

The World Health Organisation asked Aspen Medical, far away in Canberra, to set up a trauma field hospital and maternity unit on the outskirts of Mosul. Aspen Medical, founded by former Australian Army engineer Glenn Keys AO in 2003, is a specialist in delivering healthcare in remote, under-resourced and challenging settings – and Mosul certainly fit criteria two and three.

"We treated 48,000 civilian casualties," Keys recounts, "and we delivered 3000 babies."

"The thing I'm really proud of is that we didn't just buy in expat medical staff. As Australians we know that wherever we go in the world we have to align with that country's culture."

"We bring in the basics and say 'how can we tailor it to the community?'. In Iraq, we started with 60 per cent Iraqi health professionals and got it to 100 per cent. We worked with them to determine how the hospital should operate, and at the end we were able to hand it over to the Iraqis fully operational."

"It's amazing to leave a legacy that lasts so much longer than the term of the contract," Keys says.

Some contracts are death-defyingly scary. During West Africa's Ebola outbreak of 2014-16 Aspen Medical gathered 1000 staff and ran seven Ebola hospitals in Sierra Leone and Liberia, winning WHO accreditation for infectious disease-capable emergency teams.

The cool factor? It's in the positive social impact of everything Aspen Medical takes on.

As a benefit corporation, or B corp, Aspen Medical nimbly balances philanthropy while keeping its shareholders happy. The Aspen Foundation funds several community initiatives,



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such as medical scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers to gain degrees and fill critical gaps in the outback workforce. It also partners with One Disease, working to eradicate scabies in Australia by 2024. Another program has helped reduce the rate of trachoma in Indigenous communities from 15 per cent to 4.7 per cent in seven years.

And should staffers have a non-medical cause they want to support – Canberra's MacKillop House, a home for vulnerable women, being a good example – Aspen Medical will match dollar for dollar the money they raise.

No surprise, then, that employees like to stick around. Some have been with Aspen Medical since the company won its first big contract in 2004 – RAMSI, the ADF's Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, to which Aspen Medical provided staff, ambulances, medevac and on-ground facilities.

"There's definitely a particular type of person who joins our company," Keys says.

"Nearly everyone who gets into healthcare is there because they want to help. We give them the chance to do something they'd never get to do normally, travel overseas and be involved in significant programs helping others."

"We are a commercial enterprise, we have to earn money. But we have always tried to have a social purpose at the core of our business. You can make a profit but you can also make a huge difference. Like any business, we have good years and bad years, but we continue to hold that social purpose at our core – and people understand that that is how we do business."

When the call came from Africa to conquer

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Glenn Keys AO

Ebola, hands shot up. But Keys refused to send his team unprepared for the horrors they would face.

"People get to Sierra Leone and there are bodies piled up in the streets and they are not ready for it; they want to go home. I did not want to put people in that position," he says.

"So we mocked up a complete Ebola treatment facility in Canberra. Out of 200 people who did our training, only one decided not to go to Africa and we said, 'That's all right, we understand'. The others were given an enormous opportunity. They've worked with the deadliest and most infectious disease in the world. They've come back safe and sound, gone into the Australian healthcare system and they are there in case we have another disease outbreak."

"And now we have COVID."

It sounds odd to have a mechanical engineer at the top of a medical company, but Keys credits his worth as a CEO to his army training. Military personnel are forced to be organised; they learn how to gather people and equipment in difficult conditions. Keys loved army life, leaving only

because his son, born with Down syndrome, needed services that were hard to find in ADF outposts. He began an engineering start-up in the defence industry that was later sold to US interests. When Keys realised his old company was building missiles for the Gulf War, he found something better to do.

By 2003, he was in the UK working as a consultant, helping the National Health Service reduce its orthopaedic surgery waiting times from six months to six weeks.

"Talking to surgeons, hospitals, referring GPs and reception staff, we gained an enormous understanding of where the challenges were in the process," he says.

"We created solutions. Over seven hospital sites in the north of England, we delivered 5000 hip and knee replacements, 7000 minor orthopaedic procedures and 5000 outpatient appointments, helping people who had been waiting as long as two years."

Outside of Aspen Medical, Keys' latest brainchild is ground-breaking – literally. Sods are turning for Aspen's Project Independence, which helps Australians with intellectual disabilities become home owners. Project Independence has completed 20 homes in Canberra, is building another 10 and has 200 people on a wait list in Melbourne, if only Keys and the other directors of Project Independence can secure the land with state or municipal help.

"All we need are three blocks; we'll do the rest," Keys says. "Everyone talks about affordable housing, but people with intellectual disabilities seem to be so far down the list. It's important we don't forget about them."



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