

IN PRACTICE

THE LONG WAY HOME

Embodiment a unique collaboration between the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the Sydney Theatre Company, *The Long Way Home* concludes its national tour this month to a number of glowing reviews. Drawn from the first-hand accounts of Australian soldiers serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor, the production aims to realistically recreate these experiences by including military personnel recovering from physical and mental injuries, alongside a cast of professional actors.

The project has been a particularly rewarding for Erica Collins, APAM. Having previously spent 10 years working in the ADF, which included deployment in Iraq, Erica now works as a project manager for Aspen Medical, an organisation that provides medical services to all of Australia's military bases.

When the health service accepted an opportunity to get involved in the production by providing physiotherapy services to the travelling troupe of actors, Erica was excited to be handed a role to oversee the rehabilitation project.

'Personally I have a real passion for the soldiers' welfare and for overseas deployments ... given that I spent two years over in Iraq myself as a civil contractor,' she says. 'For me, I came home and I didn't have anybody that understood what I saw and what I went through. So I feel as though I really understand what the injured soldiers have been through.'

With the production's national tour encompassing 30 shows in 66 days across eight cities, it was only natural that the 13 participating soldiers—all of whom are recovering from injuries acquired during their time in active service—would need help when contending with the physical demands of performance.

Erica, who remains an active reservist, recalls Aspen's first involvement in the project during the production's pre-development stage.

'They all came to Sydney and, because a lot of these soldiers live in Darwin or Townsville or Melbourne, they were taken away from their usual health clinicians. So some of them who would be having physiotherapy outside of the army were not able to get it when they were on the road,' she says.

'When we turned up they were so happy to see us.'

Throughout the three-month performance window, Aspen has devoted two physiotherapists to the project: Mick Davies, APAM,



who works full-time; and Erica, who complements her managerial responsibilities by treating actors on a more irregular basis.

Erica highlights how the program has been able to emphasise the importance of the physiotherapy profession to the soldiers.

'These soldiers get physiotherapy in the military, but they also get plenty of drugs ... so sometimes the autonomy for decision-making in their own health is taken off them,' she contends. 'But what I like about this project is that a lot of soldiers are getting ready to transition out and it gave us an excellent opportunity as physiotherapists to show what we can do outside of the scope of the military.'

'Effectively, we empower them as adults to make decisions on their own health without being hamstrung by only interacting with the services that the military can provide.'

Touching upon the most common injury presentations that the physiotherapy team have dealt with during the tour, Erica says that in addition to a number of diverse physical injuries, the soldiers' psychological health remains an equally paramount issue.

'When people see the show they'll understand that soldiers get quite confused about their own mental health issues and it's a real pride issue for them to admit that they're sick ... that they're not well or that they are not sleeping,' she says.

'They often open up quite a bit to us about how they are feeling about certain things. The good thing about Aspen's physiotherapists is that we don't have a role militarily. We just treat them like people ... we don't treat them like soldiers.'

Reflecting on the tour thus far, Erica says the production has been a powerfully rewarding experience.

'On opening night, the director came up to me and said, 'Physiotherapy has been so beneficial to this production that you wouldn't believe it', she says. 'For instance, one of the guys has gone off medication and then, once he was off it, he became a totally different person.'

'When you see these guys up on stage and you know what they've been through, it's absolutely outstanding.'