

# Pass mark for Shepp providers

BUT HEALTH SERVICES MUST DO MORE: STUDY

By Charmayne Allison

Shepparton's diverse communities say local health services are "good" but could be more accessible and inclusive, a University of Melbourne Department of Rural Health study has found.

The study, Interaction Matters, was led by a research group at the university's Department of Rural Health and aimed to shed light on the challenges culturally and socially diverse Shepparton residents could face in accessing local health services.

"If you lived in Melbourne, there would be specialist services such as a refugee health centre or young people's centre or LGBTIQ+ centre," department director Professor Lisa Bourke said.

"Whereas in rural areas, we have one health centre and that has to deal with everything.

"Our goal was to look at those access issues and address some of those, and really give a voice to locals in doing that."

The study was authored by Zubaidah Mohamed Shaburidin, Mujibul Anam, Dr Olivia Mitchell and Prof Bourke.

Data was collected over 18 months, with 119 participants sharing their experiences through individual and small group interviews and focus groups.

The diverse pool of participants included First Nations people and people who identified as members of the LGBTIQ+ community.

People from non-English-speaking backgrounds also offered their perspectives, including refugees and asylum seekers, as did young people and parents.

"Many participants identified with multiple groups," Dr Mitchell said.

The feedback from participants was mainly positive, with many describing Shepparton health services as generally "good", both in terms of quality and inclusion.

However, some people shared "points of exclusion", where assumptions were made about them based on their obvious



**Healthy move:** University of Melbourne Department of Rural Health director Professor Lisa Bourke.



**Lead role:** Zubaidah Mohamed Shaburidin was the main author of the University of Melbourne report.



**Team effort:** University of Melbourne Department of Rural Health Culturally Inclusive Rural Health Care team research fellow Dr Olivia Mitchell.

identities, how they looked or their social or physical attributes.

"We all make assumptions to understand the world, but as the title of the report says, interaction matters," Prof Bourke said.

"Let's not assume a child is parented by a male and a female.

"But I would encourage health professionals to think about the language they use.

"In fact I'd say community-wide, that's a good message."

Prof Bourke wasn't surprised feedback from participants had generally been positive when it came to healthcare in Shepparton.

"I think our health services work really hard to provide good service for a diverse array of people," she said.

"But it's about checking that language — because language can be the difference between someone feeling included and comfortable in a health service, or somebody saying, 'I didn't like it there and I'm not going back'.

"And when it's your health, it matters."

The study was funded by the Australian Research Council.

"Let's not assume that every patient in the waiting room has the ability to hear when a doctor calls out their name.

"It's these little assumptions we all make — particularly when health services are under pressure, they're in a rush.