

# Leaps and bounds

Tales of personal growth have many twists and turns along the way, writes **Mick Looby**.

**A**t a glance, Natalie Eykman's sidestep into the booming health sector is a classic example of retraining. But like all tales of personal growth there has been many a twist and turn along the way.

Eykman started out as a professional dancer. She loved the limelight and the travel but injuries took their toll. She ended up in corporate travel, working as a travel consultant with American Express for 13 years. But when she became a parent nine years ago, Eykman's priorities shifted.

As a dancer she had been passionate about diet and fitness. But as a single mother, health and wellbeing took on a whole new meaning.

"I was told my son was on the autism spectrum at the age of two and after navigating the system for a while I became really interested in how nutrition, speech therapy, psychology and various other areas could impact behaviour and disease," she says.

A chat with Centrelink staff set Eykman on her path to a new growth industry: primary health care. After divorcing she was working out how to manage financially as a solo parent now and into the future.

"That's when I had that conversation with someone at Centrelink who encouraged me to think about going to uni," she said.

"I realised I'd always wanted to help people. And biomedicine just seemed easier to do as a parent.

"You're able to do a lot of it online, and it just looked really interesting as well."

After seven years part-time study, the new graduate landed a job at North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, the biggest of Victoria's six primary health networks that plan and



fund services for almost 1.7 million people from the CBD to the growth suburbs to the north and west.

Australia's 31 PHNs were set up by the Commonwealth three years ago to strengthen primary health care, with the aim of keeping more people healthy in the community and out of hospital.

Eykman may not have realised it as she was transitioning from travel to health, but she had landed in Australia's fastest growing industry. Almost 1.5 million people – about 13 per cent of all jobs – are in health care and social assistance according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. In 2017 the sector was projected to be the biggest creator of jobs (250,500) over the five years to May 2022, double that of the next three categories.

According to the Federal

Government's Department of Jobs and Small Business, health along with the professional, scientific and technical services (126,400), construction (120,700) and education and training (116,200) would provide more than half of total jobs growth in the next four years.

As business development coordinator, Eykman's focus is on helping GPs, practice managers and practice nurses improve access to primary care services and the quality of care they provide to patients.

One of her projects is a quality improvement toolkit to help doctors and other health professionals improve care for patients most at risk of developing chronic conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

Eykman says Primary Health

Networks like hers believe in making the system better and fairer.

"I love working for NWMPHN because it values the community and works to empower patients rather than dictate what they should be doing," Eykman says.

"There are a lot of people who aren't healthy because they've not had the opportunities that others have had.

"With good primary care we're helping reduce the number of unnecessary hospital admissions, while getting the message out there about better living."

But the change is gradual.

"You only have to look at smoking and how that's taken two generations to go from cool to uncool. It's going to be the same with fast foods and living a healthy but realistic lifestyle," she says.

**Business development co-ordinator Natalie Eykman started out as a professional dancer.**  
Photo: Leigh Henningham