

Australian doctor Rose McGready needs help to keep her life-saving clinics in Myanmar open

By [Paige Cockburn](#)

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Rose McGready works through power outages and water supply issues. *(Supplied)*

Australian doctor Rose McGready has saved thousands of lives in one of the most dangerous parts of the world but has almost no public profile.

She's a humble, no-frills sort of woman but recognises she can no longer afford to be if she's going to save more lives.

Dr McGready travelled to the Thai-Myanmar border 30 years ago for a six-month temporary work placement after finishing her medical studies at the University of Sydney.

However she never left — becoming dedicated to the plight of the Karen and Burmese people facing one of the world's most protracted refugee crises.

"If you could meet the people here, you can't give up," she said.



Rose McGready's work on malaria in pregnancy has been prolific. *(Supplied)*

She's spent every day since then working in some of the most trying circumstances to treat those fleeing the military dictatorship in Myanmar.

Often she has to donate her own blood for patients, juggle constant power outages and weigh up how much money it will cost to do simple procedures like intubation.

Throughout all this, she and her team try to block out the sounds of nearby shelling.

She's been in terrifying situations and seen the unimaginable – "I've seen someone who only had a banana leaf to shield themselves from explosions" — but still she has stayed, even raising her two children amid the chaos.



Rose McGready doing a ward round checking a newborn baby at Wang Pha clinic.

(Supplied)

Dr McGready has a specific focus on treating the life-threatening disease of malaria, particularly among pregnant women and newborns who can succumb to the infection very quickly.

And what she's discovered about the disease while working in a conflict zone has implications for everyone around the globe.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has adopted Dr McGready's research as the recommended standard treatment for pregnant women who contract malaria.

"So now if a woman in Australia goes to somewhere like Indonesia on her honeymoon and comes back with malaria, the best drug she can have is something we worked out how to give here," she said.

"We know the burden of malaria rests with tropical countries but people in developed countries travel everywhere."



Building trust with the local population has been key to the Australian doctor's success. (Supplied)



The clinics run by Dr McGready receive no government funding or support. (Supplied)

Malaria is common in large parts of Africa, south-east Asia, Central and South America and the Middle East and pregnant women can sometimes die within a week if they contract the parasite.

Over the last 30 years Dr McGready successfully ran a program of malaria elimination along the Thai-Myanmar border but she now faces the biggest test of her career.

A resurgence of malaria has taken hold due to escalating violence by the military in Myanmar, meaning thousands more vulnerable people are fleeing to Thailand.

Last month Myanmar's military used an ["enhanced-blast" munition known as a fuel-air explosive in an airstrike that killed more than 160 people](#), including many children.

The attack caused "indiscriminate and disproportionate civilian casualties in violation of international humanitarian law, and was an apparent war crime," Human Rights Watch said.



The aftermath of the airstrike in Pazigy village in Sagaing Region's Kanbalu Township on April 11. (AP: *Kyunhla Activists Group*)

Many have been pushed out of villages and into dense forest where they often live next to water sources – the perfect breeding grounds for mosquitoes which carry malaria.

"That's a problem as we have no replacement drug ... we risk a situation of having untreatable malaria," Dr McGready said.

"If we don't get on top of it it's going to mean a lot of people die and it's just so unnecessary."



Dr McGready's work has led to dramatic reductions in unsupervised home births.

(Supplied)

The sheer number of people crossing into Thailand has doubled the demands on Dr McGready and her local medical team who staff six 24-hour clinics on both sides of the border.

It's becoming more and more and difficult to pay staff and provide adequate medical supplies so the Canberra native is looking for financial support back home in Australia.

The Dr Rose McGready Foundation launches in Sydney today with the aim of raising enough money to keep her life-saving clinics afloat for the refugees who have no access to public health care.



Rose McGready heading out on a long and difficult 4WD journey to one of the remote outreach clinics. *(Supplied)*

Dr McGready acknowledges many Australians will feel removed from the conflict but hopes they can relate to the basic human desires of those caught up in the coup.

"It's normal to live locally and not appreciate what's happening in other parts of the world," she said.

"There's so many charities, and so many deserving causes ... I know we're a hard target but the people here want the same things the mums and dads in Australia want – a better future."