



2 of us

DR MARGOT WHITFIELD
& LUCIA ROMANI

Dr Margot Whitfield (at left), 51, is a Sydney dermatologist who for the past 10 years has been battling the scabies epidemic in Fiji. Five years ago, she enlisted the help of an Italian student, Lucia Romani, 31, whom she eventually helped gain Australian citizenship.

MARGOT: A friend introduced me to Lucia at an art exhibition five years ago. At the time, I'd been trying for a few years to help the Fijians sort out their scabies problem, but the Secretary of Health there wanted proof that the problem was as bad as it appeared. So I needed to help them do a national survey, but to do that I needed somebody to help me one day a week.

When I met Lucia, she told me she'd done a master's of social development, and although she hadn't had any experience and her English was a little rough, I was happy to take a chance on her because she had a lovely manner, she made me laugh and she was obviously smart. She'd put herself through university in Australia in her second language, and had been working in a coffee shop to pay her uni fees, which meant she was really motivated.

After a couple of months of working really well together, Lucia told me her student visa was running out. If I wanted her to stay – which I did – I had to sponsor her, which meant she had to work full-time for me. That was a huge financial commitment so she came in on a small salary, but she understood it was a big thing for me.

In May 2007, Lucia went to Fiji and – without any experience in doing research on her own – conducted a survey of 14,000 Fijians. It was just extraordinary. We gave the data, which showed

they had 23 per cent scabies rates, to the Fijians. They were horrified and realised something needed to be done. Then last year, we finally got funding to do the first-ever community-based clinical trial comparing an oral medication with a cream. There were tears of joy.

I don't believe anybody else could have done what Lucia did, and that's due to her optimism. That's also despite the fact that everything that can go wrong will go wrong for Lucia. She'll lose her passport, her computer will break down, her flights will be cancelled... But she just deals with it and moves on. I'm a bit like that, but I've got a lot more of that can-do attitude from her.

I feel sometimes like a mentor to Lucia, like a friend or a big sister – although she's closer in age to my two teenage children than to me! – and when she became an Australian citizen late last year, I felt like a proud mother.

I feel really protective of Lucia. Recently, she was staying in a house attached to a hospital by herself in Fiji. One night, she woke up to men breaking in. Luckily, she managed to ring the hospital and get security over, but I worried about her so much then.

I've had MS for 20 years; it makes me pretty emotionally unstable, and it affects me mostly when I get tired. With this disease, you have to trust that people can do an awful lot more

“Margot cares about people and has a huge heart, so if she can help, she will. She's been paying my salary for five years pretty much out of her own pocket.”

than you ever thought they could, so I've become much more comfortable giving Lucia responsibility. And she's very accepting of me getting her to do things she never thought she'd be able to do.

Lucia and I have travelled a lot together to Fiji. Two years ago, while we were there, Lucia's grandmother died. Six months later we were there again when my mother-in-law passed away. They were both very hard times. But we'd already seen each other pretty raw a number of times – when we'd been disappointed through work. It's no longer embarrassing to be raw.

LUCIA: When I first met Margot, I thought she was the craziest person I'd ever met. I went to her house expecting an interview; she said, “No interview, you start now!” But I quickly changed to thinking she was the most amazing person I'd ever met. She had so many great ideas and I thought, “I really hope I can help her.” From that first day, she was already a friend.

Travelling with Margot was initially quite full-on. We'd wake up together, eat together, work together, discuss things together... But it was an amazing experience because we're always on the same page. Also, when we travel she gives me a lot of responsibility – even too much, I thought at the beginning. But it's turned out great for me because I've learnt so much.

The thing that strikes me most about Margot is that she's not scared of having great ideas. Most of us would think of the consequences first – the money we need to find, the time we have to invest – but she doesn't think of that. She's so enthusiastic and makes it sound like it's the easiest thing in the world, so you can't help saying yes. One time, when we were trying to raise funds, she said to me, “Just call Bill Gates and ask him for the money.” I said, “What are you talking about?” But I did, and although we didn't succeed, we definitely tried!

I've never met anyone as generous as Margot. She cares about people and has a huge heart, so if she can help, she will. She's been paying my salary for five years pretty much out of her own pocket. She used to call me her Ferrari, because at the end of the year, instead of using that cash to buy a car, she'd buy me! But because of that generosity, it's very hard for her when someone says no to her, because she would never say no.

Margot and I don't argue; we have too much fun laughing about things, and each other. At the beginning, my English was terrible so we were always laughing about me misunderstanding things. Last time we were in Fiji, my grandma passed away. Margot was saying all these sweet things about how she would be so proud of me, and she was crying, too. In the end, we just looked at each other and I said, “You look really ugly when you cry”, and she said, “So do you!” So we just started laughing.

That first day I went to Margot's house, she told me she had MS. She's been through some tough times with that because she's a hyperactive person who does so much, and the MS sometimes slows her down. She doesn't like that at all. If I see it's one of those days where she's down, I take it as my responsibility to make sure that before she goes home she's okay, because she does the same with me.

Margot is my biggest inspiration. She's the person I'd like to be. She always makes me see the positive side, and she gives me the confidence to believe I can deal with problems. I know Margot will always be in my life. GW