

DREAM WEAVER

A new brand of woollen bed sheets could make counting sheep a thing of the past

STORY RIA PANDEY

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As one of the world's biggest exporters of wool – Australia produces approximately 80 per cent of the globe's fine Merino – we might be considered experts in its uses. But it took a Canadian marketing executive to come up with a new way of using wool fabric – as bed sheets – and to spend years researching and developing the technology required to turn it that idea into a reality.

Indi McCullough moved to Sydney in 2009 from New York when her Australian husband Stuart was transferred back to Australia by Woolmark, where he later became CEO. That was when McCullough discovered Merino wool and its health benefits, especially when it came to getting a better night's sleep.

Like most of us, McCullough was not getting enough shut-eye. According to the Sleep Health Foundation, poor sleep is increasingly common among Australians, with one in three people regularly struggling with the problem.

As a corporate executive in Manhattan for more than two decades, McCullough had had first-hand experience of the impacts of a lack of sleep. "I was working really long hours, and in an environment where that mentality was considered good," she tells WISH. "It got to the point where I'd be sleeping at my desk at 2am."

Coinciding with the rise of the wellness industry, McCullough began connecting the concept of natural fibres with sleep quality. "[Ten years ago] I saw those three trends – sleep health, natural fibres and wellness – intersecting at the same time, and I thought that it was a great chance to innovate and develop in that space," she recalls.

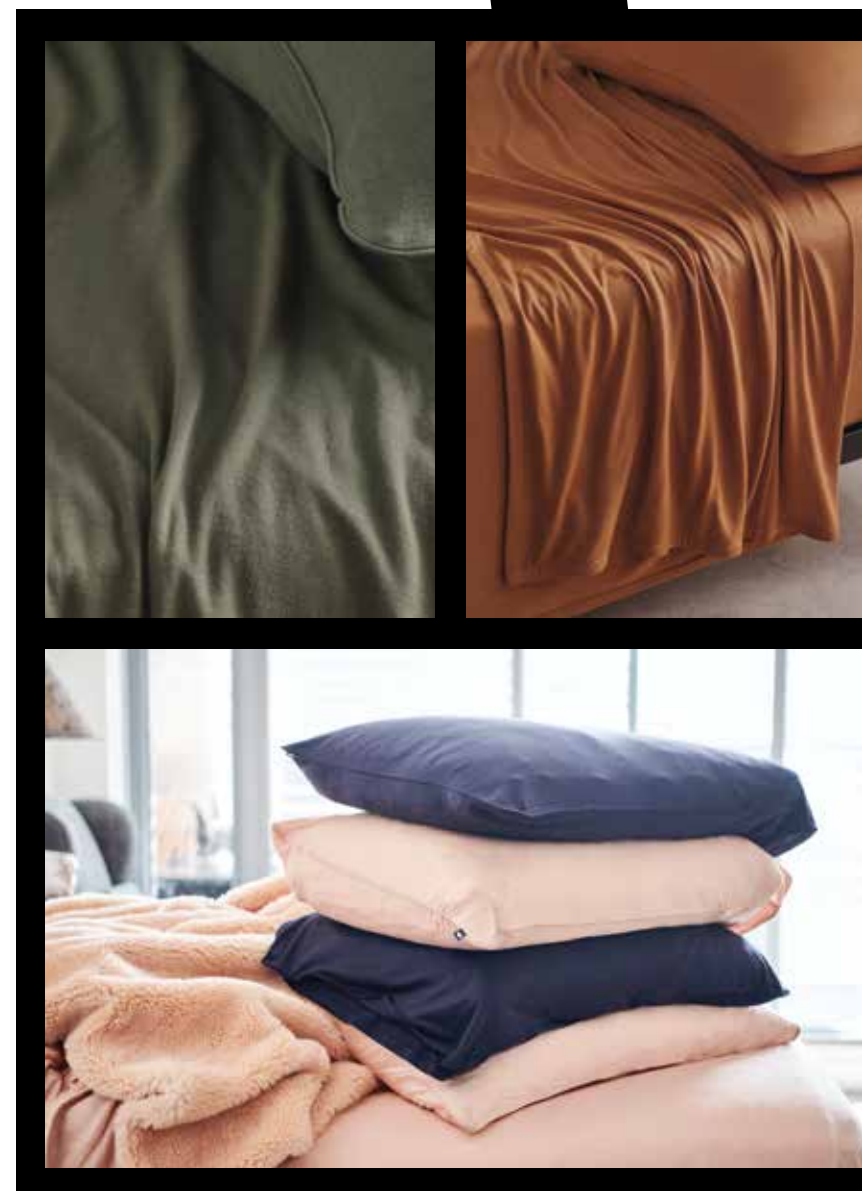
As a natural fibre, wool has been found to increase the sleep quality of its users. According to research conducted by the University of Sydney, wool's ability to regulate an individual's body temperature, keeping them in a "thermal comfort zone" for longer, allows for less interrupted and deeper sleep.

"The unique thing about wool is that it's able to absorb 30 per cent of its own weight in water and wick at the same time. And it reacts to temperature, so your body is never wet, always dry, and never too hot or cold," explains McCullough.

McCullough was inspired to use Merino wool to build products that were not only comfortable and durable, but also carried a range of sleep-related benefits. But the technology for making sheets out of fine Australian Merino wool at wider widths did not exist.

"I tried to find a manufacturer that was pushing innovation in knitting and weaving, and I could not find one," McCullough says of the lengthy process. "No one was working with Merino wool for bed linen. And no one was willing to do the super-widths required for weaving bed linen with wool, because of the risk to their machinery with the possibility of defects."

After years of research and meeting with manufacturers from around the world, McCullough found herself working with local Australian producers to create the technology and Shleep bed linen was born.



McCullough says that, unlike the traditional polyester blends that dominate the bed linen market, her range uses an ultra-fine Merino wool blended with bamboo or tencel. The fabric amplifies the benefits of wool – natural breathability, as well as thermal and moisture regulation – to create products that are long-lasting and easy to care for (most go in the washing machine, with the exception of a calming blanket).

"I have not found any bed linen in a fine Merino jersey anywhere in the world, so in terms of technology and innovation it really has been a breakthrough," says McCullough.

Shleep uses merino jersey of 19.5 microns – the industry standard dictated by the diameter of the natural fibre – or below, McCullough says, which makes it a competitor to high-quality silk and cashmere. A premium Merino jersey bed linen package (wool and tencel) includes two pillow cases, a flat sheet, a fitted sheet and a doona cover and starts at \$2500. The calming blanket (made from wool and silk) sells for \$3700, sleeping masks sell for \$170 and face masks for \$50.

While she originally planned to launch Shleep in America and Canada, the expat decided on an Australian debut to pay homage to the brand's local craftsmanship. "I'm proud of the origin of the fibre and the farmers and I want to support them as much as possible," she says.

And as the world moves towards a more sustainable future, McCullough says the brand has ambitious plans to expand along with it. "Beyond bed linen, Shleep is also moving into bespoke areas. We've invented fabric that doesn't exist anywhere in the world. So we are looking to do collaborations with hotels, architects and interior designers," she says. ☺