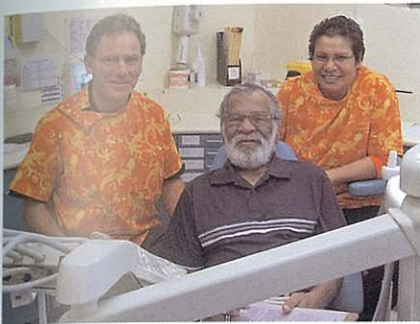


Filling the Gap Indigenous Dental Program



Sydney dentist Dr Ivor Epstein with staff and patient at Wuchopperen Health Service.

There is a critical shortage of dentists in regional and remote parts of Australia and one of the worst hit groups are Indigenous Australians. Access to dental care is difficult and there are waiting lists of over a year in some places. Simple problems then become acute and poor dental health can compound already chronic health conditions.

Filling the Gap is a response to this situation. It is a simple and effective program based on a partnership between Wuchopperen, a community controlled Indigenous health service serving 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the north-east region of Queensland, and a group of concerned individuals.

We recruit dentists, (usually from metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne), who volunteer for one or two weeks at a time to work at Wuchopperen, in Cairns. Filling the Gap assists with airfares, Wuchopperen provides accommodation, registration fees for Queensland and the use of a car, and the dentists give their time and expertise.

The Program began in mid January 2006 and by mid July, the results are really exciting.

What we've achieved

Filling the Gap is proving to be a great success. By mid July:

- 300% plus, increase in dental care provided at Wuchopperen
- 475 patients treated, including 30 new patients
- 1200 plus dental procedures completed
- 14 dental weeks provided by 11 volunteer dentists
- 28 potential volunteer dentists expressing interest for later in 2006/07.

Dentists say:

"I knew that working in Wuchopperen would be a great experience but I totally underestimated what an eye-opener it would be. Just a small amount of time made a real difference to the patients I saw. I'm already looking forward to going back." Dr Sandra Short.

"I'm so glad I did it. I would like to go again and make it a yearly thing. Even though each day was a really full day's work – I worked through my lunch hour as well to see the maximum number of patients – it was very refreshing." Dr Flora Galoustian.

Wuchopperen says:

"It has been a pleasure to have the volunteer dentists at Wuchopperen Health Service. They all have been very enthusiastic, hard working and very supportive to the staff. Patients are disappointed that the volunteer dentists

cannot stay longer as they have felt very comfortable in their care" Marion Norrie – Practice Manager.

Would you like to help reverse this chronic backlog and get some first-hand experience of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in tropical far-north Queensland?

The Filling the Gap program is flexible, so it is possible to combine the trip with some time-off in the area afterwards.

We are seeking expressions of interest from dentists now.

If you would like to find out more about how to volunteer call Uri Windt on 0418 208 755 or Gael Kennedy on 0403 131 410 or email Uri at uri.windt@tarwin.net

Filling the Gap is a privately-funded voluntary program with a steering committee of dentists, community advocates and the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit at University of NSW.



Sydney dentist, Dr Flora Galoustian and Melbourne dentist Dr Swann Lam assisting at 'kiddies clinic' at Wuchopperen Health Service.