

# FILLING THE GAP

## Dentists get active on Indigenous dental care

**Marion Norrie laughs** as she describes the fun and games involved in running the dental practice at Wuchopperen, an Indigenous health service in Far North Queensland. Another day at the office for her means working as chauffeur for a dentist with a sore leg, as a mechanic to unblock a piece of equipment, as a runabout to borrow the shifting spanner needed to fix the blockage, as a counsellor to traumatised patients and/or as a sleuth to place the current *Filling the Gap* dentist's audiology student daughter in a suitable work experience position with the local Australian Hearing Service!

Marion thrives on the multitasking essential in her position and the creativity needed to cope with the brand of 'barefoot dentistry' required to keep the dental clinics and mobile van up and running.

The practice she manages serves 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living across a vast area north of Townsville and below Cape York. Not an easy task, and even harder without a team of permanent dentists.

"As you can imagine, given the current shortages, finding full time dentists to work in this part of Australia is complex," she says.

In fact, during 2005 the service was at an all-time low, reduced to a one day a week 'toothache clinic', providing only emergency treatment due to a chronic shortage.

"There was a waiting list of more than a year," she recalls. "Simple problems then become acute, and poor dental health compounds already chronic health conditions."

*Filling the Gap* was set up in response to this crisis. It began in 2006, providing a simple yet effective solution by recruiting dentists from mostly metropolitan centres to volunteer for one or two weeks at a time at Norrie's clinic at Wuchopperen. *Filling the Gap* covers the costs of airfares, and Wuchopperen pays for accommodation and registration fees for Queensland. There is also the use of a car when available. The programme began as an idea over coffee between friends in Sydney and quickly flourished with many dentists responding to the call, keen to offer their skills and expertise and 'give back' something to the community.

Two and a half years later and the *Filling the Gap* dentists have really made a difference. Over 3,000 patients have received treatment, there is no longer a waiting list for treatment and the mobile van is out and about, visiting places such as Atherton, Ravenshoe and Mareeba, where communities are finally receiving dental care.



*Marion Norrie with volunteer dentists and staff at Wuchopperen.*

To date, more than 75 dentists have volunteered as part of the programme and the feedback from them is overwhelmingly positive.

Dr Glenda Farmer of Glen Waverley in Victoria recently returned from a two week stint along with her dentist husband. "It's hard to know whose 'gap' is most filled in this programme", she says. "As an experience in learning about Indigenous culture and Indigenous compassion and enthusiasm I would recommend all dentists take up this wonderful opportunity."

Her partner agrees. "With a long life in a dental career it is also good to just do what we are trained to do. Dentistry without practice management is actually quite a joy," he says.

Marion and her team of Indigenous dental staff enjoy getting to know the different volunteer dentists and have learnt to become very adaptive in their practice. Friendships and connections form and there is learning on both sides. Dr Farmer agrees. "The staff help make the experience special," she says. "We don't get to meet or hear the stories of Indigenous life in middle class Glen Waverley in Victoria...[*Filling the Gap*] is a remarkable venture that I would commend to any dentist who either wants to do something for others or would just like an excuse for a break to revitalize their practice."

For more information about the programme visit [www.fillingthegap.com.au](http://www.fillingthegap.com.au) or call Gael Kennedy directly on 0403 131 410. Locum work is also available at Wuchopperen (minimum of four weeks commitment).

**Gael Kennedy**  
*Filling the Gap*