

Helping Indigenous communities in FNQ

In the Indigenous communities around Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands of far north Queensland, access to dental care has been a long term, ongoing problem. The waiting list for basic care is around a year and this has been causing people with minor problems to develop acute or chronic conditions.

The problem is not a lack of facilities - the local Indigenous health service at Wuchopperen has two fully equipped dental rooms at its Cairns clinic and a mobile dental van ready to travel to Atherton and outlying communities. Wuchopperen has a community-based

the 'Filling the Gap' programme in January this year. "I have wanted to do some volunteer work in dentistry for some time and there are programs in Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia - but it's for a longer period of time and it's hard to take time off from my practice.

"I found it was quite easy to take a week off to do this and I really enjoyed the interaction with the patients and the challenges of trying to motivate them to help prevent dental problems. I'm planning to go back in November."

To date the results are really exciting. Since the programme began in January 2006 there has been:

this will occur. "The effect, over time, of dentists providing service to Indigenous communities will be profound!" she said. "The dentists that give their time are to be truly commended. Their efforts should be an inspiration to us all!"

Marion Norrie the Practice Manager at Wuchopperen Health Service is also very enthusiastic about the program.

"It's been a pleasure to have the volunteer dentists at Wuchopperen Health Service," she said. "They have all 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."



Want to get involved?

If you would like to assist the Filling the Gap program, there are two ways:

1. Volunteer your time and services:

We are seeking expressions of interest

for volunteer dentists now. If you would like to help reverse the chronic backlog of access to dental care and get some first-hand experience of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in tropical far north Queensland, call to find out more about volunteering. Call Gael Kennedy on 0403-131-410 or Uri Windt on 0418-208-755 or uri.windt@tarwin.net

health service that is highly innovative, servicing the area's 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with a range of services such as GP clinics, primary health care, counselling, family support, nutrition and health promotion. What the service does lack though, are dentists.

Filling the Gap is a response to this deficiency. It's a simple and effective program involving a partnership between Wuchopperen, a community-managed Indigenous health service and a group of concerned individuals.

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

Dentists volunteer for one or two weeks at a time. Filling the Gap assists with the airfares, Wuchopperen provides accommodation, registration fees for Queensland and the use of a car. The program is flexible, so it is possible to combine the trip with some time-off in the area afterwards.

Melbourne dentist, Dr Swann Lam, was among the first dentists to participate in

- A 300%+ increase in dental care provided at Wuchopperen;
- Over 545 patients treated, including 68 new patients;
- 1320+ dental procedures completed;
- 14 dental weeks provided by 11 volunteer dentists; and
- 28 potential volunteer dentists expressing interest for later in 2006/07.

Staff and community at Wuchopperen Health Service are extremely pleased and believe the volunteer dentists will have an impact far beyond their individual one or two week visits. Through provision of better dental care, there will hopefully be flow-on effects for people's general health.

Dr Lisa Jackson Pulver, from the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit believes

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- Dentist Job Search (DJS) recently launched 'Dental Classifieds'. A place online where dental practices can go to list second-hand equipment or materials. The price per listing is AUD\$20 and DJS has agreed to donate all proceeds to the Filling the Gap Dentist Volunteer program and the Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV) dental fund. Visit www.djs.com.au to post your ad or view current classified ads - just click on the Classifieds button.

More information about the Wuchopperen Indigenous Health Service can be found online at www.wuchopperen.com