

## Indigenous dental program

Indigenous Australians are severely affected by the critical shortage of dentists in regional and remote parts of Australia. 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.

Dentists, mostly from metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne, volunteer for one or two weeks at a time to work at Wuchopperen, in Cairns. "Filling the Gap" helps with airfares, Wuchopperen provides accommodation, Queensland registration fees and the use of a car, and dentists give time and expertise.

The program began in mid January 2006

and by mid July much has been achieved; there has been increase in dental care provided at Wuchopperen of over 300 per cent, 475 patients have been treated, including 30 new patients.

In 14 weeks, eleven volunteer dentists have completed more than 1200 dental procedures. And the news has spread, there are now a potential 28 volunteer dentists expressing interest.

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

Dr Flora Galoustian is glad to have volunteered, "I would like to go again and make it a yearly thing. Even though each day was a really full days work, I worked through my lunch hour as well to see the maximum number of patients. It was very refreshing." Marion Norrie, Practice Manager at

Wuchopperen says, "It has been a pleasure to have the volunteer dentists at Wuchopperen Health Service. They have all been very enthusiastic, hard working and very supportive to the staff. Patients are disappointed that the volunteer dentists can't stay longer as they felt very comfortable in their care."

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

If you would 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, Filling the Gap is seeking expressions of interest from dentists. Call Uri Windt on 0418 208 755, Gael Kennedy on 0403 131 410, or email Uri at: [uri.windt@tarwin.net](mailto: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 Ivor Epstein with staff and patient at Wuchopperen Health Service