

Filling the Gap

INDIGENOUS DENTAL PROGRAM



Dentists making a world of difference

■ In affluent Australian cities, when we have a toothache, we go to the dentist and have it fixed, without a thought.

But in the Indigenous communities around Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands of far north Queensland, there is a dental black hole. The waiting list for basic care is one year and that is causing people with minor problems to develop acute or chronic conditions.

And it's not from a lack of facilities - the local Indigenous health service, 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 is a community-based health service that is highly innovative, servicing the area's 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with GP clinics, and proactive support programs such as family support, nutrition and health promotion, a women's gym, and counselling services.

WHAT THE SERVICE DOES LACK, ARE DENTISTS.

Apart from a local dentist who sees patients at Wuchopperen one day a week, the rooms are empty and the queues continue to grow.

The Filling the Gap Indigenous Dental Program aims to turn this around by sourcing volunteer dentists to work at Wuchopperen in Cairns for one to two weeks at a time. Dentists volunteer their time. Flights, accommodation and registration with the Queensland Dental Board are paid for.

The first dentist to **"Fill the Gap"** was Dr Flora Galoustian, who has a practice in Sydney's Balmain. She said her week at Wuchopperen in January was tremendously enjoyable, challenging and a real eye-opener.

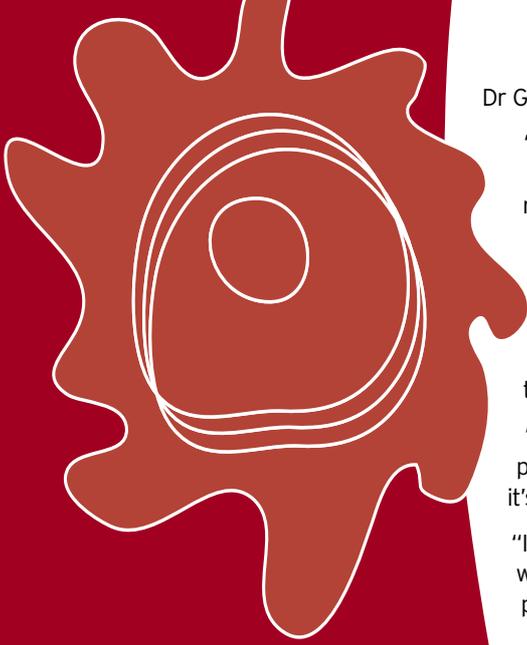
"In Sydney we live in a very affluent community and you think things are OK in the rest of Australia, but you don't realise, when you go to places like this, the people's health is third-world standard."

Dr Galoustian spent just under two weeks in Cairns dealing with acute situations.

"The first man that came in couldn't go for a job interview because he had all these rotting front teeth. If he goes through the public health system, he's put in a queue again to have the teeth extracted and then another queue to have tooth replacement - so it's really bad."

"In Balmain, the worst scenario would be that someone is on anti-depressants - but the medical history there is just amazing - everyone has rheumatic fever - there would be at least two or three in one day with diabetes or high-blood pressure or something else."

Given that oral hygiene is practically non-existent and there are multiple medical conditions in the community, such as diabetes and rheumatic fever, decay is high, so extracting teeth is a large part of the work, but proactive preventative treatment is also very critical.



Dr Galoustian rose to the challenge and found it a completely rewarding experience.

"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."

Melbourne dentist, Swann Lam, who also spent a week in Cairns in January, says she was surprised to see people come in who had never brushed their teeth.

Dr Lam, who had never treated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before, found her patients were in desperate need of an on-going dental service, grateful for the work she provided and keen to take advice about how to prevent further decay.

"I have wanted to do some volunteer work in dentistry for some time, and there are programs in Nepal and Vietnam and Cambodia - but it's for a longer period of time - and it's hard to take time off from my practice," Dr Lam says.

"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 thinking of going back again soon."



FILLING THE GAP INDIGENOUS DENTAL PROGRAM is a privately-funded voluntary program with a steering committee comprising senior lecturer, Dr Lisa Jackson Pulver, from the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit, UNSW, retired dentist Dr David Rosenwax, and community advocates Gael Kennedy and Uri Windt.

To express interest, call Gael Kennedy on 0403 131 410 or Uri Windt on 0418 208 755, or email Uri at: uri.windt@tarwin.net or fax the attached Expression of Interest Form to 02 9747 4332 and we will contact you with further information.

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

Between them, Dr Galoustian and Dr Lam saw 114 patients (7 new) and completed 218 resins/ketac, 18 extractions, 64 radiographs, 17 scale and cleans, 20 oral hygiene instructions, 2 amalgams and 5 impressions in just over a week.

Would you like to help Fill The Gap, reverse this chronic backlog and get first-hand experience 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.

WHAT WE NEED?

Dentists to volunteer one to two weeks of their time.

Where? Cairns, Qld.

What do I have to pay? We pay for airfares and accommodation and registration with Qld Dental Board. You pay for meals and any other expenses, such as shopping, taxis. A car can be arranged (if available).

What kind of work is it? Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have a range of medical and dental histories - many acute cases.

Can I take more time off? Yes. You can work for longer or you can have a holiday either before or after you complete your voluntary period of work.





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CAIRNS CLIMATE

(taken from www.cairnsconnect.com)

Cairns is a truly tropical climate. Rather than having a distinct four seasons there are really only two - the wet and the dry. The wet season runs from about November to May and the dry season from June to October. The chart below shows why these seasons are named as they are. Whatever the time of the year it is difficult to say that it gets cold in Cairns however in June and July you can often here locals complaining about the cold snap as it gets down to 10 degrees Celsius (about 66 Fahrenheit) overnight.

In the wet season the rain can be impressive. When it falls it comes in a heavy downpour that would normally flood a town for weeks. In Cairns it all drains away in a few hours and it is back to business as usual. In the wet season tropical cyclones can influence the weather (mostly February and possibly into March). Whilst they can be quite destructive cities like Cairns are built to withstand the strong winds.

For most of the year the climate in Cairns is simply perfect. Blue skies, warm but not to hot and gentle breezes to help make the palm trees sway.

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC |
|----------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Max Temp C | 31 | 31 | 30 | 29 | 28 | 26 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 31 | 31 |
| Min Temp C | 24 | 24 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 18 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| Rainfall (mm) | 413 | 435 | 442 | 191 | 94 | 49 | 28 | 27 | 36 | 38 | 90 | 175 |
| Rainy Days | 18 | 19 | 20 | 17 | 14 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 10 | 13 |

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Filling the Gap **EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM**

CONTACT DETAILS:

Title: _____ Given Name: _____ Surname: _____

Postal Address: _____

Town: _____ State: _____ Postcode: _____

Work Ph: _____ Home Ph: _____ Mob: _____

Fax: _____ Email: _____

Preferred method of Contact: _____

PLEASE CONTACT ME WITH FURTHER INFORMATION

YES NO (please tick)

Please send me an Volunteer Application Form

YES NO (please tick)

Please note:

- We require a minimum of 5 days volunteer work to make this a viable contribution, but would prefer two weeks (or more) if possible.
- Flights can be organised to include vacation/recreation time on either side of your time working at Wuchopperen.
- The weather in Feb/Mar is particularly wet and there is the possibility of cyclones, in February especially.

Please fax this Expression of Interest to 02 9747 4332.

Or post to:

Uri Windt,

Filling the Gap, 12 Woodside Avenue, Burwood, NSW 2134

Or email: uri.windt@tarwin.net

HELP US SPREAD THE WORD

Do you know of other dentists or health professionals who may be interested in volunteering in the Filling the Gap Program. Please list names and contact details (email preferred)
