



Filling the Gap

An innovative response to the oral health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

By Gael Kennedy

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia access to dental care is a long-term ongoing issue. Waiting lists of about one year for basic care are common place, preventative care is available to few, with minor problems developing over time to the more acute or chronic conditions. For some communities, it is not a lack of public dental facilities that is the problem – some services have fully equipped dental rooms within their primary health care facilities – it is a shortage of dentists.

Demographics

Of the 257 to 350 million Indigenous people world wide, an estimated 561,387 live in Australia, 2.4% of the total Australian population.¹ Nationally the shape of the population is changing, with 3.4% of Australia's young people (12 – 14 years) identifying as Indigenous² and the median age of Indigenous people, now only 21 years, compared to 37 years in the general population.³

Epidemiology

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are behind on every health indicator:

- Life expectancy – currently a 17 year gap
- Maternal mortality
- Infant mortality – two to three times the non-Indigenous rate
- Child mortality and
- Childhood and adult morbidity⁴

In 2003-04, there were approximately 2,000 hospitalisations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for diseases of the oral cavity, salivary glands and jaw, including dental caries (54%), diseases of the pulp and periapical tissues (16%) and embedded and impacted teeth (9%).⁵ In 2007, there are “disproportionately elevated rates of tooth decay wear amongst Indigenous Australians.”⁶

Social determinants

Historically, Indigenous people had less tooth decay. Since invasion, Indigenous people shared the deprivations of the Great Depression and the two World Wars, which contributed to the epidemic of tooth extractions in Australia before the 1950s.⁷ With food rich in fermentable carbohydrates relatively accessible, Indigenous people “have become as exposed to tooth decay risk factors as have non-Indigenous people. This risk worsens where there is limited access to dental health services and lack of preventative measures and education.”⁸

Responses

One response to this situation is an innovative program – **Filling the Gap**. Filling the Gap arranges for qualified dental practitioners to volunteer their time to provide dental services to patients at Wuchopperen, an Indigenous community controlled health service based at Cairns, that provides services to around 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in far north Queensland. The program is in its second year and since it began in January 2006 over 2,450 people have received treatment, with 90 plus dental weeks provided.

This completely voluntary program involves dentists contributing their time

and professional services, Wuchopperen arranging the necessary registration with the Queensland Dental Health Board and providing self-contained 2 bedroom accommodation and Filling the Gap steering committee members recruiting dentists, fund-raising and organising return airfares to Cairns. There are no costs involved for the dentists.

The benefits are far reaching – not only for the people in the region but also for the visiting dentists who are enriched by the experience.

“I strongly recommend that anyone interested in volunteering at Wuchopperen should do it. The opportunity to help others and the satisfaction of knowing you have given something which to you may seem so small and insignificant, but to the patients and staff at Wuchopperen is a significant contribution, is reward enough. I enjoyed my stay in Cairns and my stint at Wuchopperen and will definitely be putting my hand up for volunteer work again!” – Dr Sabrina Ali, SA.

“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, NSW



To find out more about Filling the Gap and the opportunity to volunteer, visit www.fillingthegap.com.au

Filling the Gap Seminar

Date: Friday March 28th

Time: 4-6pm

Venue: Level 1, 4-10 Bay St,
Double Bay, Sydney

In our seminar, we will review:

- the demographic profile of Indigenous Australia
- the epidemiological profile of Indigenous Australia, with a particular focus on oral health.

You will gain a deeper understanding of:

- the historical and social factors that underpin the gap in health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people

We will also examine some strategies and programmes that can lead participants into thinking through actions that they, as health professionals in the field, can easily take to make a difference.

Dr Lisa Jackson Pulver

Associate Professor and Director, Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit, SPHCM, Faculty of Medicine and Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute, University of New South Wales. Visiting Fellow, National Centre of Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University.

1. Nettleton, C, Napolitano, D A, Stephens, C. An Overview of Current Knowledge of the Social Determinants of Indigenous Health. Working Paper. Commissioned by Commission on Social Determinants of Health, World Health Organisation, for Symposium on the Social Determinants of Indigenous Health, Adelaide, Australia, 29-30 April 2007, pp 1 & 92.
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007. Young Australians: their health and wellbeing 2007. Selected highlights. Cat. no. PHE 88. Canberra: AIHW.
3. Reuters. Media Release: 'Australian indigenous median age 21.' 30 May 2007.
4. Dixon, J & Welch N. Researching the rural-metropolitan health differential using the 'social determinants of health'. Aust. J. Rural Health (2000) 8, 254-260; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. Social Justice Report 2005. HREOC, Sydney 2006, Ch 2; SCRCSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2007, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007, Productivity Commission, Canberra.
5. Social Justice Report 2005, op. cit., p 19.
6. Slade G D, Spencer, A J, Roberts-Thomson K F (Editors). Australia's dental generations: The National Survey of Adult Oral Health 2004-06. AIHW cat. No. DN 165 Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (Dental Statistics and Research Series No. 34), 2007, p xvii.
7. Slade G D, Spencer, A J, Roberts-Thomson K F (Editors) op. cit., p 246.
8. Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007, op. cit., p 32.