

Dentists Help Fill Gap in Indigenous Health Care

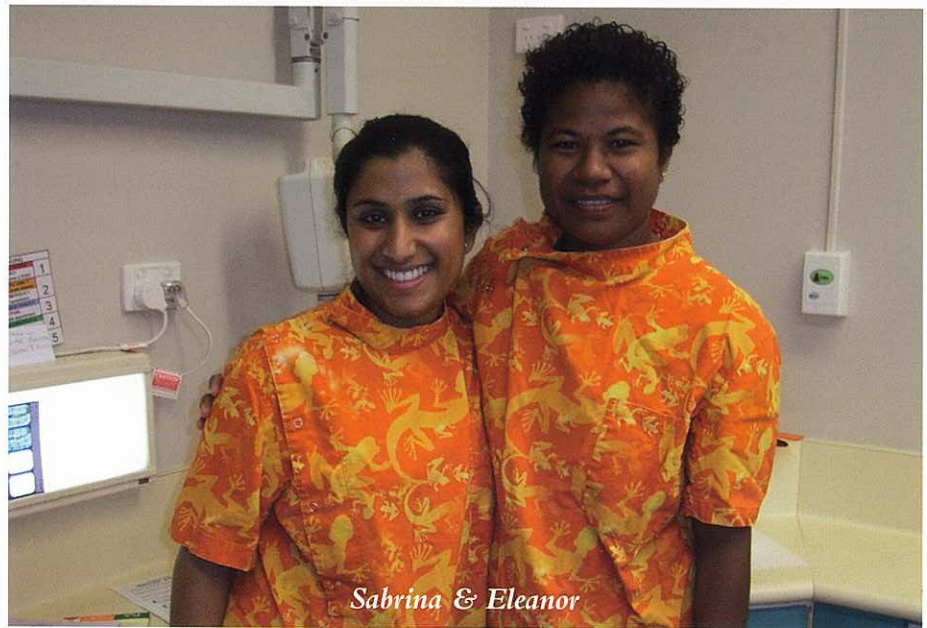
When Sydney dentist Dr Flora Galoustian found out about Filling the Gap in early 2006 she was excited – she had been looking for a way to contribute her skills to improving Indigenous health but didn't know how.

Filling the Gap offered her the opportunity she'd been looking for – a short volunteer stint (minimum one week) working within Australia. She spent ten days in Cairns, treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients at Wuchopperen, an Indigenous community controlled health service, plus she was even able to take a short vacation in the surrounding tropical reef at the end of her stay.

Filling the Gap began in 2006 and since then its dentists have treated more than 2000 patients. The program has cut the chronic year-long backlog of patients needing to see a dentist by almost 100% and is now providing a much needed service in a location where recruiting a full time dentist is near impossible.

The program covers the costs of dentists' airfares to Cairns, plus approves accommodation and even the use of a car when possible. Wuchopperen operates out of new buildings and offers comprehensive health services to around 20,000 Indigenous people in Far North Queensland.

Dr Sabrina Ali from South Australia, volunteered earlier this year. She is very enthusiastic about her visit. "The clinic



Sabrina & Eleanor

itself far exceeded anything I could have possibly imagined. The technology and equipment available for dentists were up-to-date and quite new. The staff were both highly trained and very approachable... I could see that the girls who set up and managed the dental clinic put a lot of personal effort and time into the facility. Jean, one of the senior staff members, had several absolutely gorgeous hand painted pictures, one of which I fell in love with the minute I saw it. Marion, the practice manager, keeps the practice running efficiently and effectively. Everyone contributes their bit; whether it be big or small, it is always done with love."

Some dentists are now regulars! They have been back two or three times and are able to work with the mobile dental van, travelling to the outlying communities around Cairns, enjoying busy days balanced by quiet moments, fishing in the beautiful reef after work.

Dr Ali continues, "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!"

We are seeking expressions of interest from dentists NOW for various timeslots in 2008.

Visit www.fillingthegap.com.au for further information and an application form or call Uri Windt: 0418 208 755 or Gael Kennedy: 0403 131 410

Filling the Gap is a privately-funded voluntary organisation with a steering committee of dentists, community advocates and the Muru Marri Indigenous Health Unit at UNSW.

Gael Kennedy