

# WHY *DEADLY YIRA*

## means 'beautiful teeth' for Indigenous communities

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**Dr Don Bolto** is the first dentist many people in the Aboriginal communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah in north-western NSW have seen for a long time, and for some, maybe ever.

The retired dental surgeon from Perth has just completed the first three-week placement with Filling the Gap, a volunteer dental service which started in 2006 with the aim of bringing dentists from around Australia to work for short stints in Aboriginal Medical Services struggling to find dentists to treat their communities.

For Boggabilla and Toomelah, located along the Macintyre River which divides northern NSW from Queensland, Filling the Gap is not just offering patients the confidence and self-esteem of better teeth, but important health benefits too.

Boggabilla School Nurse, 'Aunty' Rube Nixon, a long-time Aboriginal health worker and nurse, says she is acutely aware of the oral health issues facing Indigenous people, especially children, over many years.

"The school kids come to me in lots of pain, with caries, swollen gums, loose teeth... they can't concentrate or learn... and it's so important for these kids to learn," she says.

When a child or teenager at school is suffering chronic pain local teachers know the whole class can be disrupted.

In the past, she says, she's had to use her ingenuity to track down affordable dental treatment for kids in need, a challenge often involving a long trip. Now, she's relieved she can take them to the dentist straight away through Filling the Gap's new service, *Deadly Yira*, (meaning beautiful teeth). She says she always tries to bring along a parent to help deal with childhood fears and to give parents a chance to have a dental examination at the same time.

Now with a dental service available locally, the plan is to triage all the school students to ensure every child gets routine preventive treatment, rather than waiting for an emergency. With priority given to restoring anterior teeth the young people also walk away with more confidence to smile.

By starting with the kids, says Aunty Rube, entire communities can be influenced to look after their teeth and gums because better oral health means better general health.

In his first two-and-a-half weeks, Don Bolto treated 101 patients, many with complex problems, and triaged 82 primary school children at the local schools. Each now has a disposable mirror to prove it.



*Dental team with Aunty Rube Nixon.*

Dr Bolto says a long-term tooth brushing program established by teachers at the local schools had already laid a good foundation for the next generation.

"The schools are marvellous," he says.

"In five years' time – with this new dental service in place and preventive oral health care like the school brushing programs – we can expect to see a real difference in this community's teeth."

"The *Deadly Yira* dental service has been two years in the making," says Uri Windt, Chairperson of Filling the Gap and one of the key instigators of the program, with Dr Ivor Epstein and Gael Kennedy.

Given the location of the communities on the NSW side of the State border, getting the service up and running required some unique cross-border cooperation, he says.

Ironically, there had long been a public dental service less than 20 kilometres away in Goondiwindi, but as the town was across the river in Queensland it wasn't open to NSW residents. That meant the 'local' dental service was previously over 120 km south in NSW, in Moree, at the Pius X Aboriginal Medical Service where waiting lists can be long.

As private dentists are usually out of question due to cost, except for the lucky few with access through Medicare CDDS, most people only sought out a dentist when problems were so advanced it was an emergency and the patient was in a great deal of pain.

Add to this chronic health issues prevalent in the Aboriginal community such as heart disease and diabetes – closely linked to poor oral health – it's easy to see why the local community leaders and health workers were so keen to find some way to set up a local dental service.

## SETTING UP A DENTAL SERVICE

Retired dentist, Dr Ivor Epstein, one of the team who set up *Deadly Yira*, says Filling the Gap was invited by the local community to look into providing dentists.

"It wasn't so straight forward though – there was no building, no clinic, no health service to take on the legal responsibility, no money, no equipment, no dental assistant, nothing... so we had to start thinking outside the square," he says.

So they came up with an idea. If the Queensland Government would make space at the Goondiwindi Hospital Dental Clinic available, perhaps NSW would reimburse the costs?

Historically, state governments cooperate in emergencies such as floods and fire but there was no precedent for cooperation to put a permanent dental service in place. The solution was a mobile van for Filling the Gap to operate out of, parked in the grounds of the hospital within easy reach of sterilization equipment and computer systems.

Number one problem, finding a clinic, equipment and materials, was solved.

## FINDING THE DENTISTS

Next, the personnel. Filling the Gap usually recruits volunteer dentists but in this instance it was clear that the most effective solution for the *Deadly Yira* service was a permanent dentist. Not easy to find though, but through the network of volunteers, Filling the Gap sourced three recently retired dentists to cover the first three months of the service until a permanent dentist from overseas can start in 2013.

The dentists are being employed on short-term contracts by Queensland Health, which is also providing staff to make up the rest of the dental team: a dental assistant and a highly skilled practice coordinator.

Queensland Health is the employer, and issues of legal responsibility, insurance and so on are therefore taken care of. The credentialing necessary for each dentist has in itself been a hurdle but nothing that the patience and perseverance of the dentists and Filling the Gap team could not overcome.

## FUNDING

And the money? Filling the Gap has worked closely with the NSW Centre for Oral Health Strategy, which, through NSW Health, is picking up the tab and providing the funding for the service. The assistance of the NSW Chief Dental Officer and his team has been invaluable.

## ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY AND PATIENTS

What about the role of the community, and the patients themselves? This model obviously had to be something that the local community thought would work. It had to be a service that they would use. Otherwise there was no point to all the long planning and negotiations.

In previous projects Filling the Gap has always worked in partnership with an Aboriginal Health Service. Here, in the absence of an Aboriginal Health Service, Filling the Gap is developing a growing relationship, trust and a sense of a partnership with the community, including elders, leaders, workers, schools and service providers.



*Uncle Victor Dennison with all his grandchildren following the school triage session.*

Over the last year-and-a-half, key members of Filling the Gap have met and talked with the community, schools, and local service providers numerous times, at each step of the journey, and held meetings where ideas were bounced around. Each time as questions and issues arose and were solved, many more emerged.

For example, how would people get to Goondiwindi? Transport is a major issue. There is no public transport and many people don't have cars. A collaboration of local transport providers (health workers, the welfare service, schools, etc.,) is solving the problem.

## WHO IS ELIGIBLE

Who is eligible to use the service? Is it for children as well as adults? Is it for local non-Aboriginal people as well as Aboriginal people? The answer is 'Yes'.

Is the service only for people with health care cards? What about those who are working? They often end up spreading their wages across large extended families and are unable to afford private dental care. This included the very community workers who were helping their community with this initiative. The *Deadly Yira* service is now available at no cost, to everyone.

Would dentures and mouthguards be included? The answer is 'Yes', though not so straightforward or quickly, as there is no technician in Goondiwindi.

"There were seemingly insurmountable barriers all along the way," says Windt.

"But, there was also goodwill on all sides, in the health departments and among the many community stalwarts."

It became clear that fundamental to the partnership and the success of the service was the community's role in making sure it was well used.

## USE IT OR LOSE IT

"Use it or lose it, is now the motto," says Windt, "and the community is responsible for promoting the service, the transport, troubleshooting problems, monitoring usage, and encouraging people to seek treatment before it is a dire emergency."

Dr Epstein sums it up: "This sort of dental service transcends dental health needs – it has important impacts on the social and psychological well-being and self esteem of the patient and the community."

**Gael Kennedy**  
**On behalf of Filling The Gap**

For more information on volunteering with Filling the Gap visit [www.fillingthegap.com.au](http://www.fillingthegap.com.au)