

Hygienists now a vital part of the future of Filling the Gap's Volunteer programme

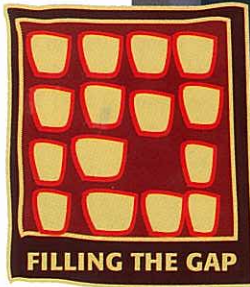
By Cathryn Carboon

I first heard about the Filling the Gap dental program when I attended the Australian Dental Association's Dental Volunteers Day in Sydney as part of the Congress in March 2007. I had the opportunity to meet with Marion Norrie, the dental practice manager at Wuchopperen Aboriginal Health Service in Far North Queensland, and discuss the possibility of a dental hygienist joining the oral health team at there.

I have been involved in several volunteer Indigenous oral health promotion activities with the Mutitjulu Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory and Rumbalara community in Victoria and knew that volunteering for the Filling the Gap program would be another great learning experience. I also knew that dental hygienists have a lot to offer the program, especially in the areas of preventive oral healthcare and periodontal therapy. The latter in particular impacts greatly on general health, in particular cardiovascular disease and diabetes, which are so prevalent in Aboriginal communities.

I was hoping that Filling the Gap would expand to include hygienists and to my delight I was accepted to become the first hygienist into the program in September 2007. I worked in a collaborative approach with several dentists at the centre, including Dr Anne Michelson from my home town of Wangaratta in North East Victoria.

I was able to use all my dental hygiene clinical skills, with a major focus on oral health education, oral hygiene instruction, periodontal therapy and fluoride treatments. I treated a wonderful mix of patients from Wuchopperen's Executive Officer for Primary Health Care to workers in the local sugarcane mills. Many patients had moderate to advanced periodontitis, exacerbated by complex medical histories



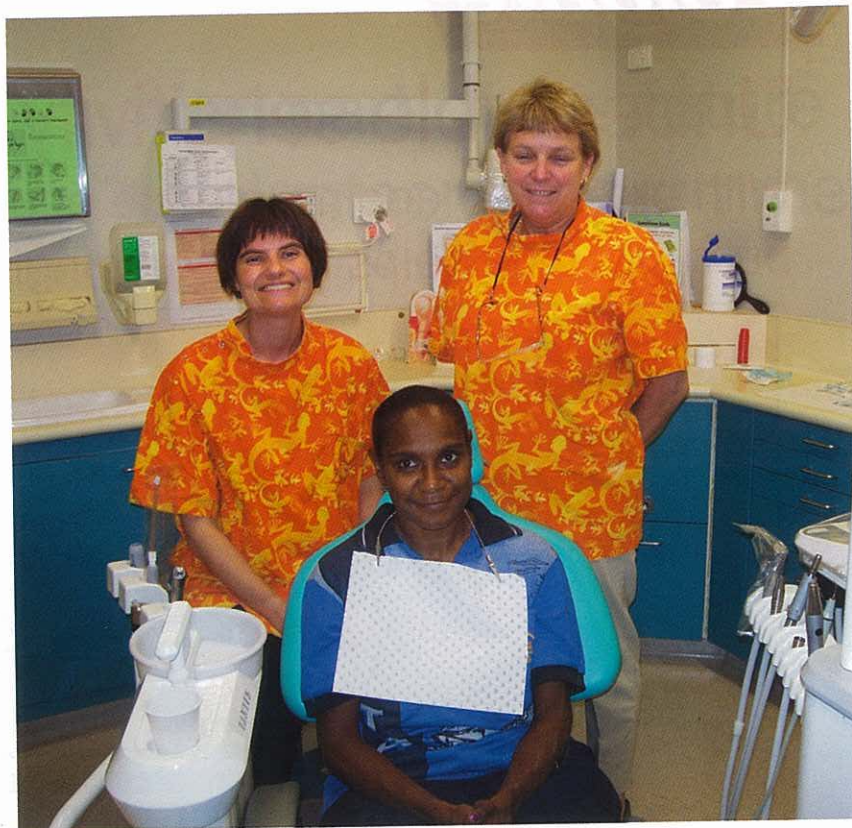
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and limited access to dental care. The patients were keen to learn how to prevent caries and periodontal disease, which made my role more rewarding. The staff also took the initiative to develop sample bags for the patients containing resources from the Quit smoking campaign, oral health brochures and samples of dental hygiene products I had recommended, including toothbrushes and toothpaste.

The dental team at Wuchopperen were fantastic, very professional in their approach to the care of their patients and very welcoming. They were all very supportive and happy to be involved in this new dental hygiene initiative. I'm hoping that some will be inspired to pursue a career in dental hygiene in the future.

The dental clinic is an integral part of the whole medical centre. It has excellent facilities, including modern dental units equipped with ultrasonic scalers, dental hygiene supplies and excellent sterilizing facilities. I was also be inspired by the wonderful Indigenous artwork throughout the clinic.

I was fortunate to be at Wuchopperen to help take part in their "Close The Gap Day", which is a national campaign to close



the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians. It was refreshing to join together with diabetes educators, dieticians, doctors and other health professionals in a multidisciplinary approach to healthcare.

I was able to share my experience with my family who accompanied me on the trip to Cairns. We all enjoyed discovering the tropical rainforests surrounding Cairns, with a visit to Kuranda on the skyrail. My children also had their first snorkelling adventure on the Great Barrier Reef. We have some special memories of sharing a farewell dinner with other members of the Wuchopperen dental team and their children at a popular Cairns restaurant. The accommodation organised by Wuchopperen was very comfortable and ideally situated next door to the dental clinic, having a car after work was also a bonus.

I am so thankful to have been given the opportunity to be involved in the Filling the Gap program and help to initiate a preventive model of oral healthcare. The program is incredibly important to help address the critical lack of access of dental care for Indigenous communities. I would love to see the dental hygiene component of the program grow and urge other hygienists to become involved. It will be one of the most rewarding things you do during your dental hygiene career!

If you are a hygienist interested in volunteering or getting more information regarding the Filling The Gap volunteer programme, please Call Gael Kennedy on 0403-131-410, Uri Windt on 0418-208-755, email info@fillingthegap.com.au or simply visit www.fillingthegap.com.au
