

Volunteer Dental Program to use Oral Health Grant to Fill The Gap for Indigenous Australians

Filling The Gap's volunteer model a proven success in addressing chronic oral care shortages among Indigenous communities

As part of the Australian Dental Association's Dental Health Week 2011 (August 1 – 7), Filling The Gap, a pioneering dental volunteer program, received a grant from the Australian Dental Association (ADA) and The Wrigley Foundation to expand its operations to include a Indigenous community in remote Northern NSW and South Australia.

Dr Ivor Epstein, Filling The Gap Secretary and founder of the Crows Nest Dental Centre, said there is a national shortage of dental professionals available to treat remote Aboriginal communities.

Nearly 40 per cent of Australians cannot access basic dental care when they need it and many of the worst affected come from rural and Indigenous communities, where poor oral health is widespread and waiting lists are often measured in years. Dental decay is more common among Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander children than any other Australian children.

"There is a dental black hole in many Indigenous communities," said Dr Epstein.

"The Wuchopperen Health Service in Far North Queensland struggled to secure a permanent dentist for close to a decade – the waiting list for dental care stretched to over a year which was causing people with minor problems to develop acute or chronic conditions.

"Filling The Gap was founded in 2006 to recruit dentists to volunteer their services for one to two weeks at a time. In return, we provide all flights and accommodation and our volunteers come away knowing they have made a real difference. In five years, we have recorded significant reductions to the community's dental care waiting lists, and are now seeing a gradual shift from predominantly emergency procedures to more comprehensive and conservative treatments."

Filling The Gap's partnership with Wuchopperen has been so successful that

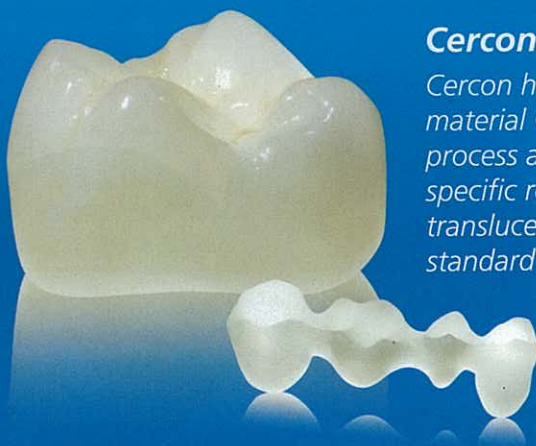
it has inspired similar programs in other Indigenous communities, and frequently receives requests from different Aboriginal health centres throughout Australia for an extension of its volunteer program in their communities. Filling The Gap plans to expand its own volunteer operations to benefit Aboriginal communities in remote Northern NSW and South Australia, which currently lack permanent dental services.

Filling The Gap will use the grant to provide approximately 10-15 weeks of care for those in need, which will result in up to 450 treatment sessions. Filling The Gap was one of seven community service dental projects to receive a US\$5,000 Wrigley Foundation ADA Community Service Grant.

The Wrigley Foundation ADA Community Service Grants program is designed to help improve access to oral health and oral health education for some of Australia's neediest communities. ♦

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