

# DENTISTRY IN AUSTRALIA

One of the advantages of choosing to work as a dentist in Australia for a few years is the experiences that you can't get anywhere else. Working in Aboriginal communities around Australia is one of these unique work experiences. We have two testimonials from dentists who had these experiences in 2006 in different Indigenous Australian communities. Here is what they had to say.

## ABORIGINAL DENTISTRY IN CAIRNS

Name: Drs Anna Beattie and Bronagh Doyle BDS  
Location: Cairns, QLD

Our experience in Wuchopperen Dental Clinic was one of the most memorable, of our working holiday in Australia. We worked there for a two month period. Situated in Cairns, the clinic is near to golden beaches and just kilometres from the Great Barrier Reef, one of the natural wonders of the world. Tropical Queensland really lives up to its reputation as the Sunshine State. The sun is constantly shining. As for adventure sports, there is an amazing array of options; white water rafting, scuba diving and sky diving.

Wuchopperen Health Centre is dedicated to the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Torres Strait is a collection of islands found between north Australia and Papua New Guinea. This unique facility includes medical, social and dental services in a bright modern building. Wuchopperen was opened in 1978 to facilitate services for Aboriginal people who felt their needs were not being met by mainstream health care in Queensland. Staff and management at the centre are mainly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Cairns is the main centre for Wuchopperen but there are also other clinics in far north Queensland.

The dental clinic provides care for adults, mostly, as the Queensland State government provides oral care for children and young people. The clinic is a very pleasant working environment. Equipment is up to date and the nurses are very efficient. There is a dental lab on the premises which produces very high quality denture work. The clinic is very busy. Usually patients are seen on an appointment basis but there is also a large number of emergency walk ins. As Wuchopperen has a very large catchment area and many patients have long distances to travel, there is a mobile dental van. This van travels into the tablelands behind Cairns to Aboriginal communities, for at least one week a month, whenever possible. The van is very compact but all the necessary equipment is there to provide dental treatment.

The level of oral health among Aboriginal people is improving all the time but in general the oral health of Indigenous people is not as good as that of other Australians. Wuchopperen is working hard to change this. Dental education is considered a very important part of the work done in the clinic. The dental team visits schools and kindergartens, giving short talks in oral health care. The emphasis in the clinic is also placed on providing regular preventive care, rather than just treating emergencies.

The overall health of Aboriginal people is not as good as that of non-Indigenous Australians and this has an impact on the dental treatment provided. Diabetes is a major health problem, and evidence shows that it is between two and four times as common among Indigenous people. Cardiovascular disease is also a big problem. A large number of the patients we treated had suffered from rheumatic fever. Evidence shows that for acute rheumatic fever and chronic rheumatic heart disease, hospitalisation rates for Indigenous males and females were eight times higher than for other Australians.

Working in the clinic provided a valuable insight into Aboriginal life. Most travellers in Australia have very little contact with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. We really enjoyed the opportunity we were given to understand more about their lives and their culture. The patients were a pleasure to treat and the staff were great to work

with. We had a lot of laughs and made a lot of friends during our time there. We would recommend any dentist travelling in Queensland to spend a few months working in Wuchopperen.

## WORKING WITHIN A REMOTE/RURAL ABORIGINAL HEALTH ORGANISATION

Name: Mark McAfee BDS (*Queens University Belfast, graduated in 2003*)  
Location: Walgett, NSW

As a 26 year old Irish Dentist I decided to take a year out from the rat race and spend 12 months on a working holiday visa in Australia. While I enjoy the sites and nightlife of Sydney it was somewhat hard to come across regular employment which is basically the same type of work as back in the UK. I was looking for an alternative and was lucky to find it in the outback of NSW in the picturesque town of Walgett.

I spent two months (June and July of 2006) working within the Aboriginal Medical service. They have an excellent, modern up to date two surgery Dental clinic attached to the medical block. I was somewhat surprised to the standard of equipment and materials available. The support staff were immensely helpful, friendly and courteous, nearly all of whom were from the local aboriginal community.

The patients came from various backgrounds in and around the surrounding districts some coming from nearly 200Kms away. The need for treatment was consistently high varying from restorative composites/amalgams to serial extractions and dentures. There is a lot of attrition/erosion in the area due to high consumption of fizzy drinks and citrus fruits, many patients needing composite build ups or over-dentures. As a sole practitioner I found I quickly became proficient in extractions some of which needed surgical invention. It allowed me to develop and improve these various skills.

Walgett itself has a good sense of community and I was often greeted by patients while doing my grocery shopping. I was also asked to a birthday party and met many people I had treated a few days previously. The nightlife is a little quiet but I was always asked / heavily persuaded to any of the social functions. A pub quiz in aid of the local primary school was an excellent and fun way to catch up with the rest of the locals, and the "Sporto club" on a Friday night was a good place to sip on a beer and watch the footy!!

The free accommodation was a well equipped three bedroom house that would look good in any large town, and the use of a company car meant I got to travel quite a bit and see the surrounding outback towns. I got to visit The Opal mining town of Lightning ridge, the cotton production in Narromine, the open plain zoo in Dubbo, and there is some excellent hiking in the Warrumbungle national park which I went to on a few visits.

All in all it was an excellent experience and the Aussie folks in outback NSW will certainly make you feel welcome and encourage you to stay longer, if the opportunity arises it's a must to.

If you are interested in having an experience like this in Australia contact Australian Dentist Job Search.

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