

THE



AGE

email: tidey@brd.com.au

Dentists filling in the gaps

For those of us who are still scared of the dentist, "Filling the Gap" is an unfortunate name for an organisation.

But it is very good news indeed for indigenous communities in Far North Queensland where access to dental care has long been a problem.

Up there the waiting list for basic care can be up to a year and this has been causing people with minor problems to develop acute or chronic conditions.

Filling the Gap is a privately funded initiative where dentists volunteer their time and skills for one or two weeks to work with Wuchoopperen, a Cairns based indigenous health service.

About 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders access the service which offers a wide range of primary health care, counselling, health promotion and family programs.

It has two fully equipped dental rooms at its Cairns clinic and a mobile dental van for



ABOVE: Dr Ivor Epstein of Sydney, helps out in Far North Queensland.

visiting nearby Atherton as well as outlying communities.

In its first year, Filling the Gap treated almost 1100 patients and attracted 19 volunteer dentists to the far north. Now in its second year it expects to increase these figures significantly and hopes that its website www.fillingthegap.com.au will help recruitment.

Dentists who volunteer are helped with airfares, accommodation, registration fees for Queensland and the use of a car. But the program is also flexible so it is also possible to combine the visit north with some time off in the area afterwards.

Volunteers from various parts of Australia have posted their comments on the organisation's

website. This entry from Dr Swann Lam, from Melbourne, is one fairly typical example.

She wrote: "I found it was quite easy to take a week off to do this and I really enjoyed the interaction with the patients and the challenges of trying to motivate them to help prevent dental problems." Dr Lam is planning to return to Far North Queensland later in the year.

From Sydney, Dr Ivor Epstein wrote: "There is a lot of emergency work. People have been in pain for weeks tolerating pain that no-one in Sydney would."

Much more information is available on the website including an application form for potential volunteers which can be down loaded.