



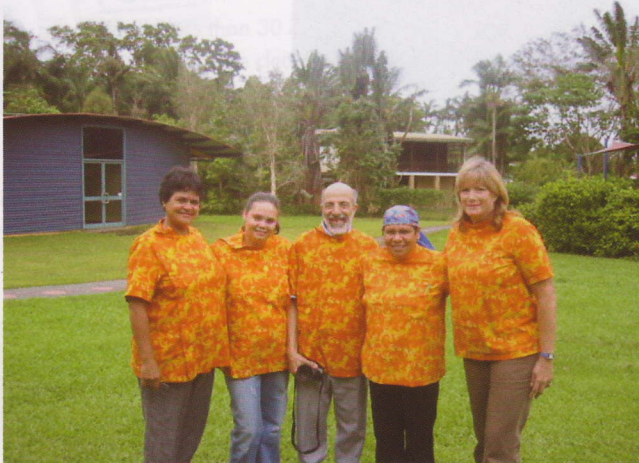
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BY DR SANDRA SHORT

Filling the gap at Wuchopperen

I first heard about the critical need for dentists in Wuchopperen when I attended a dental meeting in Melbourne in October 2005. At the end of the meeting, an announcement was made that an Aboriginal community in Far North Queensland



urgently needed dentists on a voluntary basis. The government had established a new health centre, together with a dental clinic that unfortunately wasn't fully functioning because it had been impossible to recruit enough dentists to go to Wuchopperen and perform the work.

I decided to contact the recruiting officer for *Filling the Gap*, Uri Windt, and after speaking to him I chose to donate two weeks of my time after Easter in April 2006. Even a two-week period makes a significant difference to the numerous patients needing dental work who've been on waiting lists for months and months.

I had no idea what to expect or even where Wuchopperen was exactly, but I was sure it would be a great experience. The clinic is located in a suburb of Cairns and provides both medical and dental services to a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. I was really impressed to

see how well equipped the clinic was - they had the latest technology and equipment and the staff were highly qualified and competent. My mother joined me on the trip and we were given simple but adequate accommodation and I was really pleased to be given a car for our use.

It was a real pleasure to work with the staff and they were actually one of the most highly skilled and professional teams I've worked with. The office manager, Marion, was a major asset to the clinic and it was really interesting to get to know more about all the members of the team.

During my visit, I treated 66 patients over 8 working days and several of the patients were treated more than once. As I expected, there was a heavy workload and we were very busy but it was manageable.

The type of treatments I performed ranged from hygiene and oral health advice to oral surgery. Because I enjoy surgery I was given a backlog of impacted wisdom teeth that needed removal as well as various other surgical procedures.

I removed 46 teeth in all and some of these were performed as part of surgical procedures - I now have tennis elbow in the right arm to prove it (some of those young men had very well developed alveolar bone!). I performed over 30 fillings, took 24 x-rays and even performed 10 endodontic procedures.

I even did some denture work but it was hard without a dental technician.

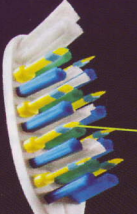
I loved meeting with the local patients. Most of them had been treated by a new

dentist each time they went to the Centre so they were never sure what to expect. I felt like each patient was quietly observing and assessing me which was fine; all of them seemed to become comfortable and relaxed. I felt really accepted when all the staff asked me to perform their dental work while I was there. I built up a rapport and a relationship with a few patients who I saw a couple of times while I was there, but most of the appointments were given on the basis of their urgency. I performed procedures on late teens and elderly at a ratio of 3:4, male: female.

While I was there, there was torrential rain every single day - the area was badly affected by Cyclone Monica. The flooding was on the news and when I looked out the door I could see the creeks overflowing. One day the office manager couldn't get to work because the flooding was so bad and my mum ended up coming to the rescue (despite the fact that she is 78 years old and computer illiterate!). She came to the clinic and took over the phones and single-handedly ran the reception desk. She even got down onto the floor to draw with the kids waiting for their parents while they had a treatment.

Everyone, including myself, was quite emotional when it came time for me to leave and I promised the clinic staff I will come back to visit them again. I'd love to go out on a mission to work with their mobile dental clinics next time - I could even do some fishing after work! I knew that working in Wuchopperen would be a great experience but I totally underestimated what an eye-opener it would be. Just a small amount of time made a real difference to the patients I saw and I'm already looking forward to going back.


Dr Sandra Short is in private practice in the Sydney suburb of Double Bay.



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