



Spreading smiles

For the past decade, Kimberley Dental Team has been bringing smiles to faces across this region. Lisa Shearon reports on KDT's recent three-week trip, when the team was joined by two final-year dental students

Dr John Owen and his wife Jan, a dental nurse and dental-health educator, founded Kimberley Dental Team in August 2009, with the aim of improving oral health in the region. Ten years later, KDT remains dedicated to the oral-health cause, regularly returning to the Kimberley to assist and educate.

KDT's most recent trip took place in May 2019, when a team of dedicated volunteers headed north for three weeks.

"We couldn't achieve anything like the results we do without our volunteers," Jan says. "They are essential to all aspects of the team."

This year, KDT were joined by two final-year dental students, Lance Giudice and Zjana Allan, who received Remote Area Student Scholarships from ADAWA to assist with their remote placement.

"Lance and Zjana were involved in all aspects of the team work," Jan explains. "They assisted our dentists, had some patients of their own with supervision, managed data, helped with all aspects of DA clinic work, and helped patients with their paperwork."

Lance made the decision to volunteer with KDT because of the prospect of returning to the outback.

"I lived in the remote Pilbara for three years and had an amazing time," he says. "As part of my work there I was involved with outreach work to a number of the local Indigenous communities, which I enjoyed.

"I was fortunate enough to be part of a team that had very close ties to the communities, which gave me a clearer insight into some

of the issues with the way health services are typically delivered in those settings.

"I had heard a lot about the KDT and how positive the work they were doing was and I wanted the opportunity to see their work in person."

Zjana first heard about the Kimberly Dental Team from Dr Jilen Patel, who gave a lecture to the dental students about his past experiences working with the Kimberley Dental Team. "His passion and enthusiasm about the trip and the work they do interested and inspired me to apply for the KDT trip," Zjana explains. "I had also spoken to past students who had been part of the Kimberley team and I enjoyed hearing all their stories and I wanted the opportunity to volunteer and contribute to the work they do."

Lance and Zjana's expectations around KDT were not unfounded – they both found the entire experience very rewarding. "I would group what I learnt into three different categories: working with children, working with Indigenous patients and working with what you have," Lance says.

"For the entire week away, I had a constant stream of questions related to what we were doing, as well as discussions on more generalised dental topics.

"Watching the way [fellow volunteer] Dr Jilen Patel interacted with patients, especially the little tricks such as ways of administering LA to patients who are anxious, was very informative and gave me new insights into ways to work with and engage children.

“It was fascinating to see how a clinic, fully equipped with everything required to deliver a high standard of care, could be transported in the back of a Hilux to a remote school and then set up in a library.”

In his time volunteering, Lance assisted with three rounds of school screenings. “This involved sitting on miniature chairs and completing odontograms at speeds I hadn’t realised were possible.

“In the clinic, I assisted with a variety of procedures from simple restorations to extractions. I was also fortunate enough to treat a number of patients myself.”

The first stop on KDT’s trip was Halls Creek, where time was spent at the hospital dental clinic, Ringer Soak Community and Yiyili Community.

“Children in both these community schools were screened and permissions obtained so that treatment could be carried out. Many adults also sought treatment and were very grateful for the opportunity to have their pain relieved,” Jan explains.

“We enjoyed some fun-filled evenings and delicious meals together concluding with a memorable campfire, popcorn cremation and vegan and pork sausage sizzle at Caroline Pool on Friday evening.”

“In every classroom we went into, we provided information on oral hygiene and dietary advice with the aid of Craig the Croc, who is the mascot for the KDT,” Lance adds.

“As we were setting up for the screenings, many of the kids would come up and have a chat about their teeth and would ask where I was from. I was also asked to do magic tricks, which I didn’t realise were part of our scope of practice. This is because, at Ringer Soak, Dr Patel is known as ‘The Magic Man’ and is the dental equivalent of the Pied Piper as the local kids flocked to see his tricks!”

Week two saw the team heading south on the Tanami Road, arriving in Billiluna in time to screen all of the children at Kururrungku before school finished. On Tuesday, a dental clinic was set up at the Billiluna medical clinic, where KDT was able to treat children identified as being in need and many adults before packing up and driving a further 108km south to Balgo late that afternoon.

On Wednesday, a team set up and had a very busy session at the Balgo clinic while the other team examined children at Luurnpa School and set up a clinic in the afternoon to treat those in need. On Thursday, one team returned to the Balgo clinic while the other travelled across to Mulan on the edge of Lake Gregory to screen the school children at John Pujajangka-Piyirn school and then run a busy session at the clinic before driving back to Balgo.

The final week of the trip was spent visiting Warmun Community. The children at Ngalangangpum School were screened and those in need treated, along with many community members. Most of the team drove back to Halls Creek on Tuesday afternoon and worked at the Halls Creek Hospital clinic for the rest of the week.

On Wednesday a small team visited Frog Hollow Purnululu School to screen and then treat children identified as needing care, and adult community members in need.

Life lessons

“I learnt so much in my time in the Kimberley, to put it all into words is impossible; it was a trip unlike anything I have experienced,” Zjana recalls.

“Jan and John have done an amazing job over the years and built great relationships with the community up there. You can tell by how smoothly the whole operation runs – to be able to come into the communities up there, be accepted and have such a great turn out of patients, many who remember the team members who have been in previous years.

“The willingness and enthusiasm of patients to come to have a check-up, scale and clean or dental treatment was very encouraging.”

“I feel it is a shame that all students don’t have the opportunity to experience the trip that I had,” Lance adds. “We do some small units on Aboriginal Indigenous, Rural and Remote Oral Health at uni, however the experience of actually participating in the delivery of such an effective care model is far more valuable than sitting in a lecture hearing about statistics ever will be. The standard of care set by the team was inspirational and has motivated me to actively continue to further my knowledge and understanding.”



“The kids in the communities were without a doubt the highlight of the trip, as they were all so inquisitive and eager to come to the dentist,” Zjana says. “Frog Hollow community was one of my favourite days; when we arrived in the morning many of the kids were still playing outside and hadn’t yet come to school for the day yet. The teachers called out over the balcony announcing the dentist was here and it was amazing to see all the kids come running up to see the dentist; they were all so excited to come see us and of course Craig the Croc, who is a big hit with all the kids.

“We provided information on oral hygiene and diet and set up a screening station in the library where we screened all the kids and provided any fissure sealant as needed. We then set up the dental equipment out on the veranda where we saw a few of the kids that needed extra treatment and any adults too.

“The kids were all so friendly and interested in what we were doing, asking endless questions about all the equipment we had, and what does this and that do. One of the younger boys who needed some treatment and was all too eager was practically jumping in the chair to be seen; he was such a little trooper, it was amazing to see.”

After a morning clinic with all-hands-on-deck, the team left Halls Creek at 1pm on Friday and travelled to Fitzroy Crossing for an overnight stay before heading back to Broome on Saturday. “We arrived in time to unpack and enjoy dinner together at the Mangrove and then the Sunday markets before flying home Sunday afternoon,” Jan concludes.

It was this sense of teamwork and camaraderie that resonated with Lance. “The standout for me about the trip was how welcoming the whole team was. I couldn’t think of a better group of people to have had the opportunity to network with, as everyone was so passionate about making a real difference to the communities we visited.

Remote Area Student Scholarship

“The scholarship is invaluable as it allows the opportunity for any dental student to volunteer for the KDT trip, without worrying about the financial burden,” Zjana says. “It allowed me the opportunity to experience dentistry in a remote community, unlike any experience I’ve had to date. It has been the highlight of my dental degree and I would highly recommend it to any dental student.”

“If I had the opportunity to do the trip again but had to pay, I feel it would be worth every dollar and would gladly do it just to have the experience that I had,” Lance adds. “However, in the final year of a degree that has such large time commitments and heavily reduces my availability to be able to work, the scholarship definitely took a burden off and allowed me to not have to worry about financing the trip, especially on-top of the two weekends of work that I missed out on.”

“To be able to walk into the schools and see the bags of toothbrushes hanging on the walls as a result of the program put forward by the KDT and to hear how the treatment needs of the communities have improved as a result was particularly encouraging.

“I feel extremely lucky to have received the opportunity to participate in the model of care that KDT is delivering as I feel many organisations could learn a lot from them.”

KDT are returning for a two-week trip to the Kimberley on August 12. The first of these two weeks will include the original August 2009 KDT team returning to Halls Creek – where there are sure to be a few celebrations for 10 years of hard, rewarding work!

In total, KDT provided examinations, oral-health education and dental services for 477 people on the May trip. Additionally, these services included 215 extractions, 173 restorations, 86 scale and cleans, 41 topical fluoride treatments and 589 fissure seals. In all, this represents \$157,119.20 worth of free dental care, assistance and advice. This exceeds the May 2018 trip total by \$29,119.

