

# PARENTS+KIDS

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## OPEN WIDE — WE'RE BACK

A Perth couple are set for another trip to the Kimberley to boost children's dental health. And below, helping runs in the family.

Dental nurse Jan Owen was browsing photographs which she and her husband John took during recent visits to the Kimberley — but the pictures were not of glorious gorges or the sun setting over the Bungle Bungles.

They were of the mouths of children as young as four who needed urgent dental treatment.

They were of angry abscesses, rotten teeth and diseased gums and it was quite a collection.

It is these photos which have kept the couple returning to the Kimberley.

Dentist John Owen and Jan, a dental nurse and homeopath, were sitting in their home with views of eucalypts and the river — the red dust of the north a world away.

Packets of gauze, rows of dental instruments and cartons of sterile gloves sat beside boxes of toothbrushes and toothpaste in the living room waiting to be shipped north.

They were preparing for a return trip this month to the Kimberley to continue their work,



Mobile dentistry: John and Jan Owen with some of their clients.

which had its beginnings with a trip across Australia in 2004 and a subsequent visit to Halls Creek in 2009 with a local choir.

For his 50th birthday, Dr Owen piloted his own helicopter across the Red Centre, around the top of Australia and then down the WA coast.

The couple had wanted to return to the Kimberley and had plans to somehow help the

communities that were more remote.

When the opportunity arose to travel there with the Madjtil Moorna singers, they both jumped at the chance.

Mrs Owen belongs to the Madjtil Moorna choir, a group of indigenous and non-indigenous singers of all ages which has performed at major events across the State.

Halls Creek schoolteacher Doreen Green invited the choir to

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visit schools in her area and in May 2009 a group of 28 singers travelled to the Kimberley to spend time with schoolchildren and the community — sharing songs and their collective skills.

"When we went up with the choir the first time, the school begged us to do something as they hadn't had a school dental service in two years," Mrs Owen said.

"We went into the classrooms with toothbrush packs, sterile gloves and disposable mirrors and taught the children about diet and brushing their teeth."

Dr Owen continued: "Our screening of 133 children from Halls Creek under the age of 11 revealed that 51 of them required urgent dental care and 23 of them required treatment within six months."

When the couple returned from the choir trip they realised they had to do something more to help.

Their response has now turned into a not-for-profit, non-government organisation that is

don't necessarily understand it as it's not herbal and it doesn't really relate to their traditional remedies but they value the difference it makes to their healing and recovery.

"Imagine a three-hour journey home in the car over corrugated roads with five people who have had numerous teeth extracted.

"The numbness is wearing off and they have been on the go since 6am to get to the clinic. Anything that can be done to reduce ongoing bleeding and post-operative complications is just invaluable."

The work being done by the Owen family and their team is just not a temporary gap in the dental health of the indigenous communities of the north.

"I like the idea of establishing numerous independent clinics within the actual communities so that travelling retirees can volunteer," Dr Owen said.

The road ahead seems daunting because indigenous health is a complex and serious issue but helping children in the Kimberley is all the motivation they need.

"You know that any effort — even if it only assists one child — is worth it," he said.



Brushwork: John and Jan Owen with Aboriginal children in the Kimberley.

## Kimberley team a family affair

The Kimberley Dental Team (KDT) is a team of visiting volunteers from the dental profession and allied health professionals, committed to improving dental care in the Kimberley area. Working with Dental Health Services, the Centre for Rural and Remote Oral Health at the University of WA, and the Aboriginal Medical Services, the team provides services to those people disadvantaged by lack of access and distance.

To date the members of the Kimberley Dental Team have screened or treated over 1200 people, mainly children, and have distributed over 2500 toothbrush and toothpaste packs. Many of these people have suffered years of severe and chronic

dental disease often complicating other health issues.

"When you have advanced dental disease you can't eat properly, you can't sleep, you can't think. Often in conjunction with chronic ear infections you can't even hear properly," John Owen said.

There are three generations of the Owen family involved in the Kimberley Dental Team.

Son David, a dental technician, provides a free service making simple dentures. Daughter Ashleigh and son Peter have helped with the logistics, transport and community interaction. John's 84-year-old father, Ray Owen, still a practising dentist, participated in a trip last year.

"My father was involved with the

Royal Flying Doctor Service during his early career and he was eager to be involved in this type of care again," Dr Owen said. He and his wife Jan recently carried out a reconnaissance trip to Kununurra and its outlying communities and will spend this month and next in the Kimberley with the dental team. There will be up to 32 health professionals offering their services.

"With our regular visits we have forged valuable contacts with the communities," Mrs Owen said.

For more information visit [www.kimberleydentalteam.com](http://www.kimberleydentalteam.com), phone 0407 998 215 (Jan Owen) or email [janowen@h-e-c.com.au](mailto:janowen@h-e-c.com.au).



In action: John Owen working on a young child's teeth at one of the clinics.