



BY DR PAUL KOTALA

## Tooth Aid

The concept of Tooth Aid started because someone asked for help. Having looked for existing dental projects in Laos and finding there were none, I responded to the question “we have no dentist, can you help” from the director of Nambak District Hospital. Having left my Sydney practice, I was looking for an aid program to help out in; it was just that I was not expecting to start one myself.

Laos has a population of 5.5 million, similar to that of NSW. Instead of the 4,250 registered dentists in NSW, Laos



sonnel on hand. Four times a year I attend Laos for training and treatment. The visit fits into one of the continual 10-day market cycle that operates in Nambak

watched by the locals. All work is done through a translator, as they do not speak English. Most of the villages do not have running water or electricity so we use the sun as our light, necessitating chair movement throughout the day.

Food is interesting in the villages ranging from bamboo worms, mole and rhinoceros beetles to the usual chicken and turkey, with vegetables and fruit being seasonable.

People are welcome to come and accompany one of the visits. Tooth Aid has just started a denture program with a school preventive program starting in September.

*Tooth Aid is a not-for-profit organisation with charity status. It operates from sponsorship and membership (all visitors pay their own costs). If you wish to join, accompany a trip, donate or assist, please visit the website at [www.toothaid.org](http://www.toothaid.org) for details. We are especially thankful to the major sponsors Halas Dental, Academy of Dentistry Int'l, GC Asia and the ADA (NSW Branch).*

has only 288. Nambak district has 60,000 people living in 100 villages. The nearest dentist was 5 hours away by tuktuk, if they can afford it. The scattered population creates problems of providing treatment as there is not a critical number in any centre for a permanent chair.

The pilot program in November 2003, over 7 days, treated 360 people and trained two medical nurses in relief-of-pain treatment. It also succeeded with the aims of producing a mobile dental tool kit, training personnel and verifying that the people valued dental treatment.

The dental equipment stays at Nambak hospital where dental treatment is now always available, as there are trained per-

District. This allows access to the greatest number of people (dates of the next visits are notified during treatment).

Over the eight visits so far, 2500 people have been treated providing over 6000 services in 10 different centres. We see, on average, 50 people per day in the different villages, operating under houses, on tracks with passing sellers going to the market and on verandahs under the constant gaze of the curious people and animals. As the people are watching, they also catch up with their neighbouring villagers.

Most mornings, we pack the equipment into a tuktuk or boat and travel to the village for between 30 minutes and 4 hours. Arriving, we quickly set-up and work

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