

Providing dental treatment in Nambak, Laos

In 2002, Sydney dentist Paul Kotala sold his surgery and took the road to achieving a dream that had begun a decade earlier. He travelled overseas with the final goal to find a project to provide quality dental treatment to people in South-East Asia, specifically Laos and Cambodia.

To his amazement there were no projects to fit into or being undertaken. So, after talking with a variety of interested parties, he developed his own project in the Nambak district of Luang Prabang Province in Laos.

The first project, the Pilot Nambak Surgery Project, was conducted in November 2003. The project was a great success with 360 people treated over seven days and two medical nurses trained in the relief of pain dental treatment.

After the visit the equipment was left at the Nambak District Hospital for future use by the trained medical nurses. Prior Dr Kotala's visit, the only dental equipment available at the hospital was a dental mirror and people would have to travel five hours to obtain dental treatment (it should be explained that Nambak would equate to Newcastle in New South Wales).

The training of medical nurses was such a success that Nambak Hospital no longer requires a visit by Dr Kotala. The local population knows that there is

always a person on hand at the hospital that can provide dental treatment. So far 290 people have been treated at Nambak Hospital by trained personnel and these consultations allow time for education, training and testing.

Following another visit in March 2004, Dr Kotala realized there was a great need and acceptance of dental treatment in the Nambak district. To facilitate the running and organization of the work done in Laos, he set up Tooth Aid Inc, a not-for-profit organization.

Nambak District has a population of about 60 000 and 85 per cent of the region is rural. Initially, Dr Kotala visited the four health care centres in the area. However, to further extend access to the local population, he began to follow the 10-day village cycle. The market cycle is a major part of the villages' routine, particularly in the more remote areas. People will often walk for up to 24 hours to get to the market.

All the equipment was transported by either tuktuk (small truck) or boat to the villages. To ensure the locals received comprehensive medical treatment, Dr Kotala was also accompanied by an ophthalmic nurse and medical doctor and assistant, with all the necessary equipment and material.

Tooth Aid Inc is presently on a 12-month project to bring a fully mobile dental surgery to the Nambak District.

Mobility obstacles are only one of the challenges faced. Most of the villages visited do not have running water or electricity. Also, communication barriers mean that much of the time Dr Kotala must work with the aid of a translator.

To date he has conducted seven visits to the Nambak District, working in 10 different villages. Dr Kotala has treated over 2000 people, removed 3353 teeth, placed 42 fillings and trained four people to provide dental treatment.

2005 is shaping up to be a busy year for Tooth Aid Inc. In June, Dr Kotala will be joined by Stavros Zervas, a master dental technician from Halas Dental, to set up a denture programme and in September a school preventive programme will commence in nine schools.

Dr Kotala was recently inducted into the Academy of Dentistry International. He was further honoured for his work with the John Booth Award as their Dentist of the Year.

** Tooth Aid Inc is a not-for-profit organization. Its capacity to carry out its projects is dependent on support from sponsors, friends and members. For further information about membership, donations or work carried out, visit www.toothaid.org. Dr Kotala can be contacted on pfrk58@yahoo.com.au*



Dr Kotala (right) treats one of the many patients during a visit to Nambak.



Trained nurses prepare to treat patients from local villages.