

DENTAL VOLUNTEERS IN AUSTRALIA

Australian dentists recognise that oral health is fundamental to overall health, wellbeing and quality of life. Oral diseases impact in many ways on an individual through pain and discomfort, social difficulties and the lowering of general health and quality of life.¹ Poor oral health is costly to the public health system and leads to lost productivity.

The dental profession has a proud record of volunteering in Australia, donating their time, money, equipment and materials to those who are disadvantaged in the community. The Australian Dental Association's (ADA) Dental Practice Survey 2007 shows 11% of ADA members had participated in volunteer projects over the past three years within Australia (6% overseas). About a third indicated that they intended to do volunteer work in the future (locally and overseas).

This edition of the *National Dental Update* will examine some of the initiatives provided on a volunteer or pro bono basis by dentists and allied dental personnel solely in Australia (as distinct from similar efforts internationally).

Discounted services through government-funded schemes

Dentists regularly provide discounted services through government-funded schemes such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and the State-based Commonwealth Dental Health Programs (the voucher schemes).

In mid-2005 ADA (NSW Branch) (ADANSW) commissioned CCH Benchmarking to undertake a benchmarking exercise of private dental practices in NSW.

Research revealed that fees derived from government-funded patients represented a 29% discount (compared with usual or customary fees). In NSW in 2004-05, ADANSW estimated that private practitioners effectively subsidised the NSW and Commonwealth Governments to the tune of \$33,425,000. At that time the NSW oral health budget was only \$109,700,000.

Many dentists offer discounts for families and needy patients. This is estimated at 10% of the total spend on dentistry (i.e., \$500,000,000).

Give a Smile™

Give a Smile™ is an initiative of the Australian Society of Orthodontists (ASO) whereby participating ASO members each year accept one public waiting list patient into their practice – and treat that patient without fee.

The programme commenced in 2005. It has grown from its inception when 60 children from waiting lists across Australia were allotted to the private sector until the present time when around 200 children annually are allocated to Give a Smile™ orthodontists.

Close to 60% of all ASO members are participants in Give a Smile™ – a remarkable level of engagement in a pro bono programme.

The total number of Give a Smile™ patients now exceeds 600. This equates to a significant contribution to needy families in communities around Australia – as well as providing a positive impact on the public dental waiting lists.

Bright Smiles campaign

Bright Smiles is a new national pilot programme designated to recruit hundreds of volunteer dentists to tackle the dental health problems of children in need. It has two key goals:

- To bring together children in underprivileged families, who have poor oral health, with volunteer dentists for free dental treatment.
- To educate the community about the prevention of dental disease.

The programme will achieve this by promoting four steps to a lifelong smile – brushing, flossing, rinsing and regular dental check-ups.

The programme was launched as research showed the oral health of Australian children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is a serious public health problem. Children in need are at greatly increased risk of developing severe tooth decay. In NSW alone, 45,000 children remain on the State's public waiting list. Bright Smiles is an initiative organised by Colgate. Other partners include *Woman's Day* magazine, as official media partner, helping to raise awareness of the issue of dental care for children, and to spread the prevention message to its readers; Dental Care Network, with 40 dental surgeries across the country, is encouraging its practitioners to join up and provide free dental treatment for children in the programme; and the Salvation Army and Barnardos, which will nominate children in need to be the recipients of the free dental treatment.


Dental relief to asylum seekers

A new scheme providing free dental care for asylum seekers was recently launched by ADANSW and the Australian Red Cross.

The team of dentists, dental assistants and a dental therapist treated up to 40 asylum seekers in four dental surgeries attached to the Clinical Training Centre of ADANSW in St Leonards.

Although asylum seekers have applied to the Australian Government for protection visas and live in Australia, they have no permission to work, no forms of social security and no entitlement to Medicare. They are dependent on charities like

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the Red Cross for basics such as food and shelter. Dental care is out of their reach which means the oral health of many is in a state of crisis. Under this scheme a dental team lead by dentists will volunteer their time four days per year.

The National Dental Foundation

The National Dental Foundation is an independent dental industry initiated entity, acting as a focal point for charity work in the Australian dental industry. The Foundation was established in October 2004 and operates in all States.

A prime aim of the Foundation is to co-ordinate the involvement of all parties who are involved in philanthropic organizational work within the broader Australian dental industry.

Current projects include:

- A Dental Rescue Day held in Western Australia on 21 June 2008 where six private dental practices opened their doors with a large contingent of volunteer dentists, dental therapists, dental hygienists, dental assistants and administration support staff to provide free dental treatment to disadvantaged individuals and homeless youth. Patients, who were unable to access dental care and suffered poor oral health, were presented for treatment by charities including the Salvation Army, St Vincent's De Paul Society, Uniting Care, Ruah emergency relief agencies, the June O'Connor Centre, and the Rockingham City Council support agencies. Around 100 patients were given \$31,000 worth of dental treatment. Many patients required further treatment and some dentists 'adopted a patient' to complete their treatment within their own practices.
- A charity day held in New South Wales on 17-18 May 2008 where nearly 300 patients were treated and 20 practices gave freely of their time, services and first class facilities to care for clients. Thirty dentists gave up a day, plus countless hours in follow-up treatment time.
- A charity day held in Far North Queensland in November last year, where volunteer dentists, working with the Salvation Army, were able to provide \$20,000 worth of dental treatment to 20 patients in the region.

Northern Territory Australian Government Intervention

As a consequence of the Federal Government Intervention in the Northern Territory, teams of dentists have volunteered their services. By the end of September, 191 children requiring extensive treatment had been treated by dentists under general anaesthetic at hospitals in the Territory, while teams including a dentist or dental therapist have been visiting remote communities to carry out general dentistry on children up to the age of 16.

The Federal Government has been slow to recognise the seriousness of the dental problems in the Northern Territory and this project is attempting to address the dental crisis and to improve future service delivery to remote communities.

There is no shortage of dentists willing to assist, but many are still encountering delays in being recruited while the infrastructure is being refined and essential equipment such as mobile dental clinics constructed.

International

While this Update is confined to reference to volunteer work in Australia, shared concern by dentists also stretches beyond the confines of national boundaries. Many of the ADA's dedicated members volunteer to assist people in resource poor countries. A factor in improving the quality of health care is to link dental professionals to events, organisations, professional activities and volunteer opportunities around the world. It is with this aim that the ADA Inc's (Federal body of the ADA) Federal Council has established a Special Purpose Committee on Dental Volunteers.

For more information visit:

www.ada.org.au/dentalprofessionals/Volunteers/voluntaryAid.aspx

Reference

1. Lamster IB, DePaola DP, Oppermann RV, Papapanou PN, Wilder RS. The relationship of periodontal disease to diseases and disorders at distant sites: communication to health care professionals and patients. *J Am Dent Assoc* 2008;139:1389-1397.