

DENTAL VOLUNTEERS

AUSSIES GIVE DENTAL CARE to East Timor's most vulnerable

After participating in a number of Equal Health camps to southern India providing free dental care to people who generally would not have access to these services, Paul Stockham from Bundaberg, Queensland, set his sights on Equal Health's volunteer dental work in East Timor and shares his experiences:

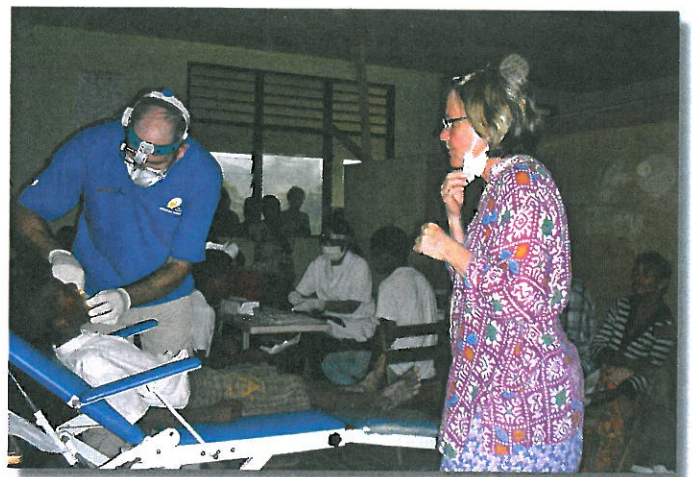
"In November 2012, I volunteered with dental assistant, Kaye McLellan, in East Timor with Equal Health. East Timor has a young population with over 50 per cent of people under the age of 18. Children are taught to speak Portuguese in the schools and very little English is spoken, especially in the rural areas.

Based in the town of Gleno, about 30 km or a 90 minute winding hill climb from Dili, we quickly learned some local greetings as the villagers were very friendly and we felt quite safe wandering around the local streets and marketplace. Our accommodation was in rooms at the medical centre and we ate with the other health workers from the clinic. Rice was eaten two or three times a day with some locally grown vegetables and their favourite fried chicken. The chickens, amazingly, came frozen from Brazil, direct to the Timor highlands!

In contrast to the India trips that provide multi-disciplinary medical health services, the East Timor visits provide dentistry only to the people in the villages. The work is in partnership with a local medical clinic sponsored by a coffee cooperative, and involves the Equal Health dentist, with or without an assistant, travelling to rural areas with a local dental nurse/therapist Joaquina and Jacob, the driver, translator and general organiser. The visit is for two weeks, based in a rural area in the mountains, with the middle weekend spent in Dili.

Working in the town clinic, a local school, an orphanage, and in a smaller clinic further up the mountains, the dentistry provided was mainly extractions and ART restorations. There was a great need for dental treatment and patients were grateful for the services offered. We treated many children and teenagers and their stoic attitude to treatment was just amazing. It was not unusual to be extracting teeth in five or six year olds in two or three quadrants and their behaviour and acceptance of treatment was excellent.

One memorable afternoon began with setting up our portable equipment in a quiet classroom which quickly filled with patients and onlookers as we treated schoolchildren and adults. Faces were looking in all the windows and the darkening skies brought an electrical storm and heavy rains which flooded over the roof. The noise was deafening and the situation surreal, but we worked



Paul Stockham and Kaye McLellan provide free dental care in East Timor.

through and as the skies cleared and the crowds dispersed we were left with a satisfying feeling of having made a difference to many people that afternoon.

On a quieter morning in town we treated a group of five teenage schoolgirls who all had suffered chronic pain from broken down molars. They patiently waited while their friends underwent the necessary extractions and when finished all left as a group smiling and discussing their treatments with each other.

A number of clinics are spread throughout East Timor and are visited by the local therapist who carries out basic treatments. Obviously, more assistance is needed to service the needs of this growing population.

The partnership between Equal Health and Clinic Café Timor has been established to enable Australian dental teams to provide primary and preventive dental care during a safe and well coordinated visit. Trips are funded by the participating dental teams making a tax deductible donation.

This trip is recommended to anyone with an interest in travelling to a destination that is not about tourism. It is a unique mixture of cultures and people with a genuine need for as much assistance that we can offer."

Paul Stockman
On behalf of the SPC Dental Volunteers