

THE KIMBERLEY DENTAL TEAM

Brother John Owen AM, and his wife Jan, having become aware of unmet dental treatment needs in the remote northwest regions of Australia, launched their 'Kimberley Dental Team' in May 2009. The population is primarily made up of our indigenous aboriginal people located in remote regions 2,500 kilometres from our capital city Perth. The vast majority of people treated are disadvantaged people of all ages. Most of the treatment carried out was initially emergency care, however more recent visits have been providing follow up care. Many of these localities have very poor transport access and very limited access to services.

Brief references have been made to this community service program in recent issues of *Desmos* (2009, Vol 115, No 4, and 2010, Vol 116, No 2).

Brother John and Jan have built a team of 25 volunteer dentists and dental assistants who operate on a fly in fly out basis.

All treatment is provided free. Brother John owns and operates his own helicopter, which enables access to the most remote areas. Brother John and Jan commenced this project as a self-funded humanitarian project. Brother Brian Koch, current president of the Western Australian Branch of the Australian Dental Association, was a very early participant in the program.

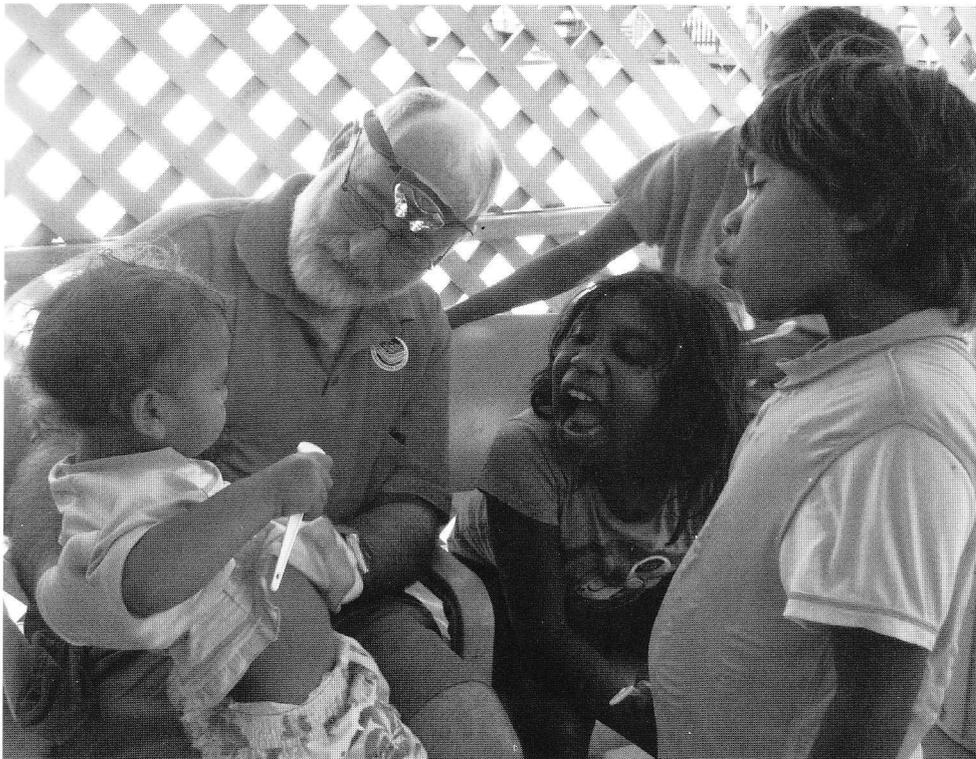
In February 2010 Brother John and Jan and a small advance Team left Perth for a one-week treatment program. They flew by helicopter into Warmun (Turkey Creek) in the remote far north. 35% of the children seen required treatment within 6 months, and 10% required immediate urgent treatment. However at Hall's Creek 38% of the children seen required urgent immediate treatment.

85% of the adults seen required immediate urgent treatment. Brother John (an orthodontist) carried out urgent extractions in the breakfast room at the school

with the help of an old headlamp that he has used on his mountain climbing adventures (Kilimanjaro, Mt Blanc, and Mera, to name a few). The remaining patients were referred and arrangements made for non urgent treatment to be carried out in Kununurra. The week was a very busy and satisfying experience, even though every day was around the 41 degrees Celsius mark (106 degrees Fahrenheit). A highlight of the week was when the Team was asked by the Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Megan Buckley, and the high school kids, if they would sponsor the guernseys for their new Warmun Junior Eagles football team. The Team readily agreed.

In May 2010 the Team returned to Hall's Creek to provide three weeks of dental care. As planned, this visit coincided with the return visit of the Madjitol Moorna choir. Concerts, choir activities, lots of singing and fun were incorporated with the dental treatment schedule. Brother John and Jan's son Peter joined the team and assisted with Dental Health Education, developing x-rays, and providing music. One of the choir members, Tracy Sandercock, joined the Team on an educational day trip to outlying communities at Billiluna and Balgo where the school children were screened.

Bro Ray Owen OAM, father of Bro John, together with dentist Dr Daniel Cocker and dental assistant Kristal Walker travelled to Kununurra by a commercial flight and then travelled by road to join the Team in Hall's Creek. From there the Team then travelled to Ringers Soak, a small community 150 km south east of Hall's Creek (a 40 minute helicopter flight), where children and adults were screened. Plans were made with the school and clinic to get the urgent cases over to Hall's Creek for treatment later in the week. Brother John, Daniel and Kristal also returned to Balgo, (75 minutes south by helicopter), to commence treat-



Screening of children and families on the veranda of the Aboriginal Medical Service clinic at Hall's Creek. The kids love to help

ing the urgent cases. Brother Ray, Jan and Peter stayed in Hall's Creek and treated the people from Ringers Soak who had been screened two days earlier.

The Team was then invited to a BBQ at Burks Park hosted by well respected community leaders, Helen and Roy Wilson and Councillor Sciona Brown. Executives from the Dept of Housing were present, and the Girls from Oz sang two beautiful songs under the Kimberley stars.

At the beginning of the third week many more patients in urgent need, including those who had travelled long distances from Ringers Soak, Billiluna, Frog Hollow, Warmun and Yiyili communities were treated. Some had to travel up to 200km to reach the Hall's Creek clinic. This included some people who had been identified at the previous February 2010 visit. With help of 'Craig the Crocodile' (see photograph), 199 screenings and dental health education had been carried out at Red Hill School, the Department for Child Protection Hostel, and the Kindy and Pre Primary classes at the Hall's Creek school, Balgo, Billiluna and Ringers Soak.

During the three weeks the Team provided screenings, dental treatment, dental health education and toothbrush packs, advice and referrals to 428 people. This ranged from old stockman 'Jack' at the Frail Aged Centre, who claimed to be 101, down to little Kim from Frog Hollow, who was only five. Brother John had to extract her two lower first molars. Little Kim had four close friends in attendance who 'stroked her arms and legs reassuring her all the way'. Other treatment included two partial dentures, and an upper removable orthodontic appliance. The laboratory work was provided by David Owen and David Walters in their Perth laboratory at no charge. The Kununurra Hospital now has an orthopantomographic unit, an OPG (for panoramic radiography of jaws), and 51 OPGs have been requested from the February and May visits of 2010.

The Team follows up treatment sessions with phone calls to the various communities to check on recovery from treatment. Understandably, these people are so grateful and thankful and just so happy to have their dental problems dealt with so well.

The ever busy Brother John then had to return to Perth in his helicopter to prepare for a flight to Melbourne to attend a meeting of the newly formed Dental Board of Australia. Brother John is the only West Australian member of the Board. This is just another of a myriad of responsibilities accepted by Brother John that have been described in detail in a previous issue. The rest of the Team returned to Perth via Kununurra.

In August 2010 the Team returned for their 3rd visit for 2010 (and 5th overall) to Hall's Creek and the Kimberley communities. For the first time the Team visited communities outside the East Kimberley, following invitations from the Kalumburu and Gibb River communities. At Kalumburu the State Government Dental Health Services equipment and materials had been made available to the

Team. Then it was on to the Gibb River Community in the helicopter ready for an 8.30am start next morning. On arrival at the clinic 8 men of ages ranging from 17 to 45 were lined up waiting for care and advice. The Gibb River community is a million acre working station owned and run by the community. All of these men had varying degrees of pain and only a couple had ever seen a dentist before. Next day it was back to the helicopter for a flight over the King Leopold Ranges back to Hall's Creek to meet the rest of the Team who had taken a commercial flight into Kununurra and driven down to Hall's Creek.

As well as screenings and treatments at Yiyili, Warmun and Crocodile Hole communities, this trip also provided return visits to remote Balgo Hills and Ringers Soak. When the Team arrived at Balgo at 9.30am after a 70 minute helicopter flight they were greeted by 33 patients all waiting to be seen.

Statistically it was a very busy trip. 408 patients were treated. Team members were very fortunate that just before it was time to leave, the Nguyuru Waaringarrem Music



Br Ray Owen, Br John Owen screening children at Ringers Soak Community School

Festival was held and they were able to enjoy a couple of hours of the performance of the children. Plans are underway for the Team to return visits to the region for a total of 8 weeks in 2011.

The Team works very closely and productively with the State Government Dental Health Services to maximise the use of valuable government infrastructure, and to provide support to assist in emergency care, and educational and preventive services in vast and very isolated and difficult locations. The Team is not a substitute for Government services, but is designed to provide services over and above what the Government is able to provide. The Team

believes that the use of enthusiastic culturally sensitive volunteer personnel not only provides much needed dental care, but greatly assists in the reconciliation process with our indigenous community, especially the young.

The Team receives marvellous support and hospitality from the local hospitals and medical staff in the region. They are included in many social activities. They met the Governor General Ms Quentin Bryce AC on her visit to Hall's Creek. They have great fun sharing meals and laughs with the locals in the Sports Bar at the Kimberley Hotel. They enjoyed a day trip to a place remarkably called 'Saw Tooth Gorge'. They enjoyed

'wine and cheese at sunset'. But nothing compared to the joy of seeing the happy smiling faces of the two children who, after suffering years of pain, had general anaesthetics and treatment in Perth, organised by the Kimberley Dental Team and are now pain free and able to enjoy their lives. Both are back at school and all smiles, albeit with not many teeth present.

The Dental Profession and our remote communities are indeed indebted to the wonderful and selfless contribution that our colleagues undertake to make life better for others.

Brian Atkinson,
Historian, Western Australian Chapter



Br John, Jan and Br Ray Owen (John's father) ready for flight to next community