

KIMBERLEY DENTAL TEAM

On 4 June 2014 **Jan Owen** presented an illustrated talk on the [Kimberley Dental Team](#) (KDT) and how she and her husband John became involved in this project. Jan was a keen member of the Madjitil Moorna Choir, singers of Aboriginal songs, who had been invited by an Aboriginal elder and school teacher, Doreen Green, to sing with the children of the Halls Creek District High School. Following this trip, during which Jan and John provided some dental screening for the children, they decided to found the KDT in 2009.

Through research they discovered that government funding for dental health was limited in the State Budget and virtually non-existent for Aboriginal dental health. Government dentists had no receptionist to handle appointments, filing or record keeping, which made their workload very high. A government dentist would visit the Halls Creek clinic once every 6 weeks on average.

John Owen, an orthodontist with special interests in younger patients with disabilities, in particular indigenous health issues, re-established his general dental career after a break of nearly 30 years. He already had a helicopter pilot's licence, and initially he and Jan (formerly a dental nurse and dental health educator) based themselves in Halls Creek. They flew out to Aboriginal communities on invitation only. Jan emphasised that they had to gain the trust of the elders before anything could be done. They had help from volunteers, including university graduates looking for work experience.

Working out in the open was best in getting whole families, not just the children, to come to the mobile clinics. It worked because everyone could see what was being done, and it was amazing to find how interested many were in the dental procedures undertaken.



KDT Team May 2010

Experience shows that sending posters ahead to advise when the mobile dental clinic is due in the community is all that is needed.

The members of the community make sure the message is passed on to all those who may not have seen the poster.

Once sufficient funds were raised a caravan was purchased and fitted out as a basic mobile dental clinic. However, after a road accident, it was decided that a Hilux with a canopy fit out would be safer and a separate accommodation van would be used.

Initially the bulk of the work involved extractions as most of the children had rotten teeth. Some of the very serious cases were flown to Perth for treatment. This damage is a direct result of the very high sugar content in the diets of young children from all walks of life; not just indigenous children.

The decay rate of indigenous adults over age 30 seen by the KDT is generally low however many suffer severe gum disease. Recently the Northern Territory Corp has taken charge of many community stores and this has seen a vast improvement in food quality and consequently in the diet of indigenous communities as a whole.

The main aim of the mobile clinics is to not only provide a check up for the whole family but to also hand out dental packs. The dental packs are handed out at schools each term and consist of toothbrushes, tooth-paste etc, and, for approximately 4,000 children, this equates to 16,000 toothbrushes alone.



KDL mascot Craig the Croc, with lots of free toothbrushes

The new Child Dental Benefit Scheme will be beneficial in supporting KDT financially but the paperwork is making it extremely cumbersome to access.

Jan also made the point that support from the many volunteers and voluntary organisations like Rotary and the McCusker Charitable Foundation has made it much easier to achieve their goal to improve indigenous dental health.



Frog Hollow (near Warmun) 2010

Susan Clarkson

