



Kimberley's Flying Dentists

Heather Zubek meets the founders of the Kimberley Dental Team, who are helping to put a healthy smile on faces in northern WA.



Sitting in their home with views of eucalypts and the [Swan??] River, Perth orthodontist Dr John Owen AM and his wife, Jan, talk about one of their trips to WA's Kimberley region. Their photographs of ancient gorges and waterholes are combined with scenes far more confronting.

Pictures of children's swollen faces, rotten teeth and diseased gums seem at odds in a scrapbook documenting a trip to Australia's stunning north. Yet these are the photos that motivate John and Jan to return to the Kimberley and continue their mission to extend dental care to remote and regional communities.

In 2004, John, who was qualified to pilot a helicopter, celebrated his 50th birthday by flying Jan and himself across the Red Centre, around the top of Australia and down the WA coast. 📍



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“Everywhere we flew in Queensland and across northern Australia was beautiful, but nothing prepared us for the stunning beauty of the Kimberley,” says Jan. “It was almost like coming home,” adds John. “It is just a magnificent part of Australia.”

The couple was eager to return to the Kimberley and had plans to somehow help the more remote communities. When the opportunity arose to travel there with a local choir they both jumped at the chance.

Jan belongs to the Madjitol Moorna choir, a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous singers of all ages who have performed at major events across WA. In May 2009 a group of 28 singers made the trip to Halls Creek and spent time with schoolchildren and the community, sharing songs and their collective skills. During the choir’s tour John offered his services, completing 133 dental checks on the local schoolchildren.

“When we went up with the choir the first time, they begged us to do something as they hadn’t had a dental therapy visit in more than two years,” recalls Jan. “We went into schools with toothbrush packs, sterile gloves and disposable mirrors and taught the kids about diet and brushing their teeth.”

“In Halls Creek our screening of 133 children under the age of 11 revealed that 51 of them required urgent dental care,” adds John, “and a further 23 required treatment within six months.”

When they returned home the couple realised they couldn’t live with that knowledge and do nothing about it. What began as a response to their awareness of the huge gap in dental health care in the remote north has now developed into a highly coordinated organisation determined to make a difference.

The Kimberley Dental Team (KDT) is a not-for-profit, non-government organisation, now endorsed as a deductible gift recipient, consisting of a team of visiting volunteers from the dental profession and allied health professionals. The team works together with The University of Western Australia, WA Country Health Service, Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council and Dental Health Services to provide additional and often urgent services to the remote communities of the Kimberley. These are the communities that are most disadvantaged by the health care system through lack of access, limited staff and distance.

Last year, the KDT completed its 10th trip to the Kimberley. Twenty volunteers worked out of ☺

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profile

medical centres in communities such as Ringers Soak and Warmun. Daytrips to the remote communities of Balgo and Mulan by helicopter, and to Nicholson Block and Yiyili by vehicle, were also undertaken.

The results achieved by the KDT volunteers are remarkable. The statistics are amazing, but at the core is the fact that these numbers represent people who have suffered severe and chronic dental disease that has compromised their general health. Most Australians take for granted the simple regime of daily brushing. Without educating and screening, people in remote communities would endure a lifetime of dental decay and gum disease.

“When you have advanced dental disease,” explains John, “you can’t eat properly, you can’t sleep, you can’t think. [Dental disease is] often in conjunction with chronic ear infections, so you can’t even hear properly.”

John and Jan make a great team. Together their unique skills make the KDT a formidable presence in the Kimberley. In addition to flying into communities and providing dental care, John coordinates the dental health professionals. Meanwhile, Jan takes care of logistics and travel details and, as a dental nurse and homoeopath, assists with post-operative care.

“I incorporate some simple homoeopathic remedies, such as arnica, as they are very effective for post-operative care,” says Jan. “The Indigenous communities don’t necessarily understand it, as it’s not herbal and it doesn’t relate to their traditional remedies, but they value the difference it makes to their healing and recovery.”

There are three generations of the Owen family involved in the Kimberley Dental Team, with all of the adult Owen children playing a vital part. Dental technician and son David provides a free service making simple dentures. Daughter Ashleigh and son Peter have helped with the logistics, transport and community interaction. John’s 86-year-old father, Dr Ray Owen OAM, participated in the May 2010 trip.

“My father was involved with the Royal Flying Doctor Service during his early career and he was eager to be involved in this type of care again,” says John.

But it’s not all fillings and extractions. Evening mealtimes are usually community affairs around a campfire or at a local roadhouse. “On Friday evenings we celebrate the end of the week with a visit to China Wall, just outside Halls Creek, followed by a sunset picnic around a campfire at Caroline Pool, which is a lovely swimming hole about 10 kilometres from town,” says Jan.

“We tend to fly the teams into Kununurra and they stay at the Discovery Holiday Park or the Kununurra Hotel,” says Jan. “They generally visit the highlights of the town and have dinner at PumpHouse Restaurant before heading down to Halls Creek.”

The road ahead for the KDT might seem daunting, as Indigenous health is a complex and serious issue. But, according to John, once you meet the kids and families of the Kimberley, the path is clear. “You know that any effort, even if it only assists one child, is worth it.” 📍

For more information about the Kimberley Dental Team visit www.kimberleydentalteam.com.

Below: Jan and John Owen visiting a Kimberley school.



FAST FACT

South of Halls Creek is Wolfe Creek Crater National Park, the site of an 850m-wide and 50m-deep meteorite crater – the second biggest in the world – created millions of years ago.

A MOUTHFUL OF ACHIEVEMENTS

To date, the Kimberley Dental Team has:

- screened or treated more than 2,514 people, mainly children.
- provided 1,801 dental examinations.
- performed 1,073 extractions and 675 fillings.
- distributed more than 2,500 toothbrush and toothpaste packs to families.
- collaborated with the WA Healthy Schools Project to provide 4,000 children at 39 Kimberley schools with a new toothbrush each term (total 12,000 toothbrushes).
- provided almost \$370,000 worth of free dental care, advice and education.