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## All smiles for rural dental placements

After years of planning and collaboration, dental students in Western Australia now have more opportunity to complete clinical placements in rural and remote locations as part of their studies.

Rural Health West has been working closely with The University of Western Australia to develop placements aimed at increasing the profile of rural practice for the future dental workforce.

Rural Health West Senior Workforce Consultant Brooke Wilson said the idea first came about nearly eight years ago when she struggled to recruit dentists into rural locations, despite strong demand from employing practices.

“There seemed to be very little interest from dental graduates to consider roles in the country, as they had received little to no exposure to rural practice during their studies.

“The only ‘rural’ placement option was Bunbury, which is really a large regional city and not particularly reflective of practising in locations such as Esperance, Kununurra or Katanning.”

The stars aligned for Brooke when she crossed paths with specialist paediatric dentist and UWA senior lecturer in clinical dentistry, Dr Jilen Patel, about 18 months ago.

“Jilen provides visiting dental services in the Kimberley and he was quite concerned about the lack of dental care available to the remote communities there.

“He was really passionate about addressing that service gap and recognised that providing dental students with immersion opportunities could be a potential solution.”

Since that time, Jilen and Brooke have been working to get rural and remote clinical placements off the ground for UWA’s dental students.

“It’s been a huge exercise in logistics, as well as stakeholder relationships.

“Dental students need close clinical supervision and as many of the remote communities are unable to provide this supervision, we can’t just send a student out alone. There also needs to be a supervisor.

“We also then needed to identify clinics willing to host the students and their supervisor and arrange patient appointments. Plus finding accommodation, which can be scarce in many rural towns, funding for travel etc. It has been a huge effort from all involved.”

These efforts have paid off with the first remote placement taking place in April with two dental students, Hayden and Wendy, and clinical supervisor, Dr Tracey Gold, spending two weeks working out of the dental practice at the Derby Aboriginal Health Service in WA's Kimberley region.

Tracey said the experience was very beneficial for the students to see how dentistry works in a remote setting.

"Many of the appointments over the fortnight were not planned, they mostly required emergency treatment and the students got to understand the burden of disease in such remote locations," said Tracey.

"In Derby, there is no permanent dental care and people need to travel to Broome – about 2.5 hours away – to see a dentist. However, Broome also has a shortage of dentists and the waiting list for an emergency appointment can be up to six weeks.

"So there is truly a dire need to increase the number of dentists choosing to practise rurally, and that needs to be nurtured and encouraged among aspiring dentists."

Dental student Wendy said the experience has given her a greater appreciation of the inequity of health services in the country.

"Every patient we saw had so much work that needed to be done; and it wasn't work that should be delayed, such as patients with acute pain for weeks and months.

"It felt great to provide such a vital service; it was very rewarding. However, there needs to be better access to care, both emergency and preventive."

Dental student Hayden said the placement had inspired him to return.

"In the city, we wouldn't be doing the type of work we were undertaking while in Derby.

"We've done lots of oral surgery, extractions, fillings and witnessed the impact of people being unable to access the care they need."

Wendy said while the clinical experience was fantastic, the experience was beneficial in other ways.

"In Perth, we would have nurses who would take care of sterilisation; however we had to do that ourselves, so we had a quick crash course in that.

"We also learnt to problem solve when we encountered issues with equipment, as you can't duck out to the nearest supplier.

"It was also valuable to work alongside allied health professionals.

"Dentistry in Perth can be quite isolating, but working in an allied health setting like DAHS, we were able to witness how intra-professional clinical communication and integration can lead to better overall health outcomes."

At the completion of their time in Derby, the trio travelled to Broome to visit the dental facilities at Broome Regional Aboriginal Medical Service and two private clinics.

Brooke said the students appreciated the chance to see the variety of practice they could expect in the country.

“Both Hayden and Wendy seemed quite keen to explore options to work in both the Aboriginal health setting, as well as private practice.

“There are plenty of opportunities available to them and certainly many potential job offers on the horizon for them in the future.”

Additional placements for dental students have also taken place in Roebourne and Newman in WA’s Pilbara region and Katanning in the Great Southern region.  
**ENDS**

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*Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health.*