

Timor Leste Dental Program Retrospective

This year marks the twentieth year since the inception of the Rotary Timor Leste Dental Program (TLDP). In June 2003, The Carmelite Sisters in Dili invited ICD Fellows Sandra Meihubers and David Sheen to set up a dental clinic in their Maubara Health Centre, some fifty kilometres west of Dili, the capital of Timor Leste. With the country still in turmoil from the events surrounding its independence, there was a great need for basic dental treatment.



The Program soon became an outreach program when a Toyota Troopcarrier 4WD became available, allowing transportation of portable dental equipment to remote areas. This vehicle was shared with the Lions East Timor Dental Program set up by ICD Fellow Terry Yuen from Adelaide who partnered with Klinik PAS, a local NGO based in Becora, Dili.

The TLDP was initially sponsored by the Rotary Club of Kiama NSW. However, the Rotary Club (RC) of Chatswood Roseville is now our sponsoring Club. Our Rotary Australia World Community Service (RAWCS) Program began in 2004/2005 and continues with the assistance of our volunteers and donations of money, supplies and equipment. The RC Chatswood Roseville Project Managers, Peter Kindred and Michael MacQuillan, have been outstanding supporters and fundraisers for our program for many years.

ICD Fellow Blanche Tsetong became the Program Coordinator in 2012 and has implemented a remarkable transition from a treatment based program provided by Australian volunteers to a program that now also employs two Timorese Dental Nurses (Oral Health Therapists), Nico Peres and Ana Tilman. The main focus of the visiting Australian volunteer team members is the training and mentoring of our employed dental nurses as well as other Timorese Dental Nurses (TL Ministry of Health employed) who join our volunteer teams from time to time.



It has been rewarding to see the improvement in the clinical skills of our Timorese colleagues that has increased their scope of practice and provides tangible benefits for their communities. Their diagnostic, preventive, oral surgical and restorative skills have benefited enormously by the teaching and mentoring of long term volunteers, ICD Fellows Blanche Tsetong, David Digges, Geoff Knight, John Moran, Ashley Freeman. Team Leaders Wayne Pearson, Mary Tiutiunnik, Peter Shakes, Henry Gilkes and Hans Raets have also made important contributions to the clinical skills and abilities of our Timorese friends. *(Photo: Ana Martins, Nico Pires and Ana Tilman discussing suturing techniques with volunteer Niamh Grant.)*

ICD Honorary Fellow Keith Mentiplay has been pivotal in organising appropriate fixed and portable dental equipment. His equipment servicing visits has allowed the training of equipment maintenance for Timorese dental nurse Nico Pires who competently keeps the dental show on the road.

Over the years we have been blessed with many volunteers. Andrew Moran, Gordon Saggars, John White, Tony Slater, Karen Sloane, Stephanie Shields, William Harriman, Liz Eberl, Carolyn Digges, Aisling Digges, Melanie Ware and Jane Ruston are some whose contributions have been very much appreciated. Importantly, we now have a cohort of younger dentists who have enjoyed the camaraderie of a volunteer team and wish to continue the TLDP's good work into the future.

The Program continues due to the partnership with the Carmelite Sisters, especially Sr Filomena Da Costa, Sr Joanhina, Sr Fatima at Maubara, Sr Inacia Mafalda, the Regional Superiors of the Carmelites, and Dr Martin Dos Santos (Father Bong), at the Jesuit Parish of Railaco. Our Rotary liaison team in Dili (Mario and Judite) are essential in liaising with the Timor Leste Government agencies and smoothing bureaucratic hurdles out of the way for a successful team visit. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Working Documents between the Carmelite Sisters, the RC of Chatswood Roseville and the TLDP were renegotiated this year. The Timor Leste Ministry of Health requires this MOU, enabling our TLDP teams to register, work and mentor in Timor Leste.

Most years, four or five volunteer teams, usually of two dentists, and often a dental assistant, work alongside our Timorese colleagues. Each team stays for two weeks and usually returns to the same districts, having built strong contacts with local authorities and schools. Towns to the south and west of Dili such as Maubisse, Maliana, Railaco and Atsabe/Letefoho are visited each year.



Our program was interrupted by covid-19 in 2020 and 2021 when no volunteer teams visited. However, fortunately, Nico Pires and Ana Tilman, when not restricted by government regulation, were able to do limited work at the Maubara Clinic and in-school health education visits. Volunteer teams returned to Timor Leste in 2022 and again this year with our last team for 2023 currently in Timor Leste. *(Photo: Timorese dental nurses (oral health therapists) Ana Tilman, Nico Pires and Ana Paula Salgado)*

Ana Paula Salgado, well known and highly regarded by our volunteers, was sponsored to study dentistry at Fiji National University by our Program with support from ICD Section VIII from 2020 to 2022. The covid pandemic presented challenging times for the University, the students and in particular Ana Paula, who was unable to return home for three years. Unfortunately, Ana failed to progress to her third year of the BOH/BDS Program. She has returned to Dili and we are very happy that she has assisted three of our four volunteer teams this year. She is now considering what path her future career will take. Ana Paula is most appreciative of the support of ICD Section VIII and, in particular, those who provided mentoring and advice during these very challenging years for her.

The TLDP relies on the goodwill of those who volunteer their time and donations of financial support from individuals and organisations. Since 2014 the ICD has given TLDP over \$25,000 AUD which has been used for the purchase of much needed new equipment such as a portable compressor and ultrasonic scaler, upgrades to our essential Troopie and toward Ana Paula's tertiary education.

The end of 2023 will see ICD Fellow Blanche Tsetong retire from her role as Program Coordinator after 11 years. She has been the glue that has held this program together and leaves big shoes for the rest of the Advisory Committee to fill.

To get a better understanding of how the TLDP provides much needed dental assistance, please visit <https://timordentalprogram.org/>. There you can find team reports which provide an insight into life on the road and how much treatment we provide. There is even a donate button!



David Sheen

sheendavid24@gmail.com

<https://timordentalprogram.org/>