



## QCoal Community Dental Service

Oral health is important for more than just a bright smile. In fact, the condition of a person's mouth can be a reflection of overall health and even provide indicators of more serious illnesses.



Thanks to the generous support of QCoal Foundation, the Royal Flying Doctor Service dental team has been able to provide more than \$2 million in free dental treatment from a fully equipped state of the art surgery located in a mobile semi-trailer.

Since the service's commencement in 2013, the QCoal Community Dental Service has visited 14 remote and rural communities throughout central and western Queensland.

RFDS dentist, Dr Plessis van der Merwe, says many of the patients he sees often have little understanding of just how important dental health is.

"Some of the patients we're seeing are 50 years old and they have only been in a dental chair once or twice in their life, and that was generally when they were kids."

With dental care proving to be so poor in many of these communities, the role is a demanding one and on a daily basis, Dr van der Merwe has to make the decision whether to repair or extract teeth.

Although education has been identified as an issue, dental assistant Monique Slade acknowledges that access to health services in rural and remote communities also plays a significant role.

In addition to this she believes the expense of travelling and then seeing a dentist can be enough to move prospective dental appointments down the 'to do' list.

"In the rural communities there's a lot of graziers who and doing it really tough," she said.

"They're trying to keep cattle alive in the drought, whilst keeping the business and farm running, so they are putting themselves on the backburner.

"We've had patients who've actually extracted their own teeth with a pair of pliers, and done all sorts of damage, because they can't afford to travel to a dentist. The budget just doesn't stretch that far."

Fellow dental assistant Jo Conway finds the work she does through the QCoal Community Dental Service to be incredibly rewarding.

"A lot of the patients we see were previously living in pain because they couldn't afford to go to the dentist," she said.

"Then we come and take the pain away, fix up their teeth, and they aren't out of pocket which is such a relief to many... it brings tears to your eyes because they are just so appreciative of the service."

For more information call 1800 002 507 or visit <http://www.flyingdoctor.org.au/dental>



ABOVE > RFDS Dentist Dr Plessis van der Merwe and Dental Assistant Monique Slade, form part of the QCoal Community Dental Service team. LEFT > The QCoal Community Dental Service team work hard to restore the damage to teeth caused by years of oral health neglect.