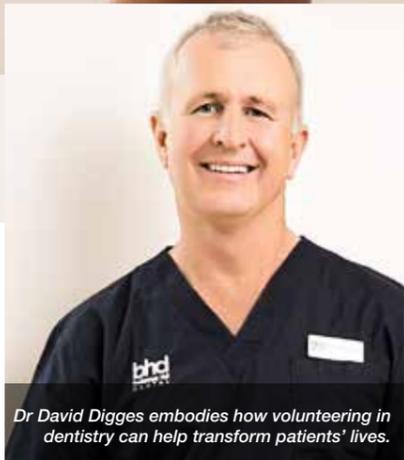




MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH VOLUNTEERING



Dr David Digges embodies how volunteering in dentistry can help transform patients' lives.

Voluntary dental programs are making a huge difference to the lives of vulnerable patients.

"She later sent me a letter saying that her mum would be proud not just with her smile but that she was on the road to recovery with her life. I still get a bit teary thinking about it now."

This was one of the countless patients helped by the ADHF's volunteer programs, which provide essential pro bono dental treatment to disadvantaged members of the community.

Homeless patients with alcohol, drug and other addictions and those with other health issues are also treated.

The programs include Dental Rescue Days, which links patients referred by different charities to a surgery which opens their doors only for these patients on a particular day, and Rebuilding Smiles, which provides dental treatment for domestic violence victims.

Another program is Adopt A Patient, where volunteer dentists are 'paired' with one patient who receives a full course of required treatment, whether it is fillings, periodontal care, dentures and in some cases crowns.

The programs have provided millions of dollars' worth of treatment for patients since the ADHF's formation in 2008.

Volunteering has been a real labour of love for Dr Digges, who won the Centre for Volunteering NSW's Volunteer of the Year title in 2016 for his work establishing the National Dental Foundation, which has since merged with the Australian Dental Health Foundation.

"As a younger dentist, I didn't really understand the 'power' of dentistry," Dr Digges, who also runs the Bellevue Hill Dental Practice in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, said. "Seeing how your skills can transform the lives of other people is incredible."

"You see patients get confidence in themselves – that's really uplifting. You are contributing a lot more than fixing their teeth. It's not just about giving patients back their smile. It's about giving back their dignity."

That's a sentiment shared by Dr Maxwell Swart, an ADA NSW member based on Sydney's North Shore.

Dr Swart volunteered for more than 25 years treating patients with intellectual disabilities before later seeing an advert for Dr Digges' work.

He now treats patients from charities including the WHOS program, assisting people with drug and other addictions.

"For me, dentistry revolves around being accessible to all levels," Dr Swart said. "It is essential in our society that we make dentistry as accessible as we can."

"Obviously, there are challenges – I'm seeing patients suffering both pain and shame. The patients haven't had much experience with dentistry so they can be anxious, but our staff are great at calming them."

"I never judge people on who they are or where they have come from – I think that's important. They are patients who need treatment and are usually grateful to receive it."

Dr Swart said volunteering had greatly benefited him personally and professionally.

"Providing dignity for people was and is a huge thing for me," he said. "I get great satisfaction that I've been able to give back to the community."

"Getting away from the whole financial factor of our profession, you are doing this for the love of dentistry."

"Given there is a shortage of public dentistry in NSW it makes it more important to give this a go."

Dr Digges said he encouraged all dental professionals to participate.

"I'd probably try one or two (of the programs) first and see how you go," he said. "You may surprise yourself and find it's a good fit."

"You may also be surprised at the benefit you bring to people's lives."

'IF OTHER DENTISTS ARE DOING GOOD, WHY SHOULDN'T I?'

Tim Mahony has participated in the Australian Dental Foundation's volunteer Dental Rescue Days at his Chapel Road Dental Surgery in Bankstown, south-west Sydney, for the last few years:

"A few years ago I reached a point in my career where I realised dentistry had been pretty good to me – now it was time to give something back. I also thought it was time to show the community the 'good' side of dentistry as we hear plenty about the bad side."

"I had gone through university with David (Digges) so I knew about his voluntary work. I thought, 'if he is doing something good, why shouldn't I?'

"I usually look ahead to when we are lighter on bookings (in my surgery) and then I arrange a next (Dental Rescue) day with the coordinator then. We usually see about seven patients on the day with each appointment lasting about 45 minutes."

"Our patients have been referred by different charities such as the St Vincent de Paul Society. You see a lot of women who suffered domestic violence in their 40s and 50s and may be missing teeth or in pain."

"I was a little unsure about what to expect when I started, but honestly – most patients are very nice. Many have had limited dental treatment in the past so they may be anxious, but mostly they are grateful to be helped."

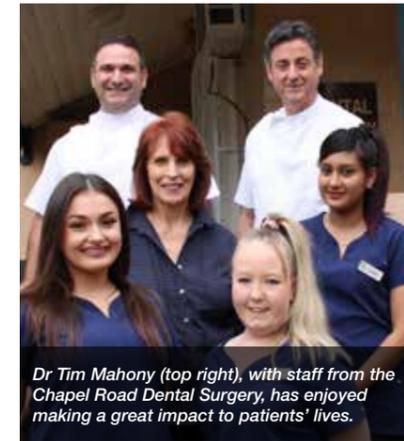
"Hearing their stories makes me realise that I have it easy and we are helping people in society who have had it a lot tougher. My staff also love putting on the uniform and doing something different. They realise we are doing this for people who need it."

"I remember treating a lady whose teeth had all virtually rotted. Afterwards she sent me a letter telling me how much the treatment had changed her life. That brought home the difference I could make through this."

"Professionally, volunteering is also great experience because you do plenty of extractions and fillings which can really hone your dentistry skills. You build yourself personally and in your role too."

As a younger dentist it would be invaluable for developing your skills.

"As a dentist you have huge financial pressures. The bills never stop and time is precious. I do think though that for older dentists looking to give something back and for undergraduate and younger dentists looking to learn more about their work, volunteering presents great opportunities."



Dr Tim Mahony (top right), with staff from the Chapel Road Dental Surgery, has enjoyed making a great impact to patients' lives.



INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING?

The ADA NSW Branch co-ordinates the NSW and ACT programs for the Australian Dental Health Foundation (ADHF) through State Co-ordinator, Claire Rawlinson. There are three programs – Adopt a Patient, Dental Rescue Days and Rebuilding Smiles. Dentists provide treatment in their practices. The state co-ordinator will liaise with your practice staff to match you with a patient at a time you have a free appointment. There is no ongoing commitment.

"The volunteers that we have work tirelessly for us and already make such a difference, as the stories from David, Maxwell and Tim illustrate," she said. "I think their stories also show how improving someone's oral health can transform their lives."

"Obviously people have other commitments and demands on their time, but these programs have a tremendously positive impact on people's lives. If we had a bigger pool of volunteers, we could make even more of a difference to a lot more of our patients in need."

"We are always happy to hear from dentists across NSW and the ACT who are interested in volunteering. We provide guidance and are happy to discuss how you can get involved and what works best for you."

"If you feel you could offer an hour a week or an hour a month, one of the greatest gifts you can give is your time."

NSW dental professionals interested in discovering more about volunteering opportunities should contact ADA NSW State Coordinator Claire Rawlinson via: adminnsw@adhf.org.au