

Overview of the dental training clinic facility of Griffith University in Brewarrina, NSW

The School of Dentistry and Oral Health at Griffith University started a rural and remote clinical outplacement for final year dental students in February 2009. This placement is in partnership with the Brewarrina Shire Council and Greater Western Area Health Service, and funded by the Commonwealth Grant for Dental Training – Expanding Rural Placements Program (<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/work-st-dterp>). Further funding to build capacity is also provided by the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Fund. (<http://www.aboriginalfund.riotinto.com/>). The project leader at Griffith University for this project is the Chair for Rural, Remote and Indigenous Oral Health. This chair is generously sponsored by Colgate Oral Care (<http://www.colgate.com.au/app/Colgate/AU/HomePage.cvsp>).

The dental clinic comprises 4 dental surgeries. In the two-years of the project so far 96 (of the 97) final year dental students have spent a 3-week rotation in Brewarrina. Students are usually rotated in groups of 8 each. Student accommodation and travel is provided. The staffing at the clinic includes a supervising dentist, a dental assistant and a receptionist.

In 2010 all 5th year students completed a clinical outplacement rotation at the Brewarrina rural and remote dental clinic. Students are then invited to provide feedback on these rotations via an online survey. 91% of the students provided feedback and most were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. More than 80% of students felt that they:

- increased their awareness of the contribution made by the environment (physical, economic & social) and dental services to the dental welfare of the public
- gained an appreciation of the day-to-day organisation of the clinical environment including health and safety
- increased their appreciation of the importance of teamwork within the dental team
- developed skills of patient management including communication skills

- developed clinical operative skills in a primary care environment
- learnt to effectively utilise the resources available to deal with problems confronted
- learnt to work independently

Most believed this option has provided them with a valuable learning experience.

Less than a third of students felt they were now more likely to choose a career in the public sector; and about the same were now more likely to work in a rural and remote setting, after the clinical placement in Brewarrina. The fundamental aim of the placement is to convince students during training that there are options to develop a professional career in a rural and remote setting. However the forces driving new graduates to take up employment in the private sector in large cities are considerable. The 2009 dental graduates, who also experienced the Brewarrina placement, were asked about their employment status a few months after graduation. About 60% of the new graduates responded to the survey, 80% were in the private sector, and more than two-thirds in the capital cities. The main reasons expressed for not opting for employment in a small town were to be close to family and home, and the professional support and social life in a city / large town. The beneficial impact of the rural clinical experience might however only be realised when these graduates are confident to venture into clinical practice settings in rural locations.

The general comments provided by the 2010 students highlight the positives and negatives of the experience, but also highlight the difficulties of this type of project for all stakeholders.

Example of general comments:

Bre was a great experience and 3 wks was a perfect amount of time. Clinically I learnt how to use what I had and appreciate all that I have at GH1/metro areas in general

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Very good experience at working on cases where referral was not an option

Placement with a lot of potential to give students a great learning experience but still in requirement of better organisation to achieve this

Thank you for organising an excellent outplacement. It was a great learning experience. Hope to have more patient flow in the future.

Work was great however weekends were quite boring. We didn't do anything on the weekends at all

While I enjoyed my time in Brewarrina, it was a very frightening place and I got quite homesick

The Brewarrina rural clinical placement appears to be very beneficial for the overall clinical experience of the dental students at Griffith University. However issues related to patient flow, fully functional dental surgeries and turn-around time on repairs, and consistencies in staffing are challenges confronting all partners in this project. ■

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