THE BOGGABILLA & TOOMELAH INDIGENOUS PROJECT

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Introduction
The aim of this project was to observe the oral health status of the Indigenous Australians in the communities of Boggabilla and Toomelah. The Poche Centre for Indigenous Health Central Tablelands Dental Service was established in 2013 to address and improve the oral health of Indigenous children and adults living in the rural and remote communities within the central tablelands of New South Wales; including Boggabilla and Toomelah.

Two of The University of Sydney’s Bachelor of Oral Health students, Teigan Barnfield and Patricia Gittany undertook a two-week rural placement project. The project involved the use of ethnography, directed by a research fellow Michelle Irving. Ethnography is a term used to describe a qualitative methodology for an in depth study of healthcare issues and the use of participant observation in everyday life practices and culture (Savage, 2000).

The Indigenous population of Australia experiences a poorer quality of life than the general population of Australia. This is demonstrated by the greater levels of disease, disability and lower life expectancy (ADA, 2006).

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Where
Boggabilla is a small rural community of Moree Plains Shire in NSW, Australia. Its location is adjacent to the New South Wales-Queensland border; only 6 kilometres south from the Queensland border (Moree Artesian Water Country, 2006). Boggabilla is the Aboriginal word meaning ‘Great Chief Born Here’. The town has a large Aboriginal community with 52.1%, over half of the population, identifying themselves as Aboriginal which makes it a total of 594 people (SBS, 2011).

Founded in 1937, originally a Pentecostal mission, Toomelah is located within inland NSW and is home to 231 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ABC, 2012). Positioned along the Macintyre River, North of Moree, Toomelah is a total of 798.8 square metres, with the closest capital city being Brisbane, about 280 kilometres northeast (Census Quickstat, 2011).

Methods
- Two reflective journals containing daily journal entries from observations during the placement.
- These journals were submitted to Michelle Irving for further analysis and used as qualitative data to assist in a needs analysis.
- Additionally, oral health promotion presentations were carried out to a mothers group, a primary school and a high school.

Results
- There was an increase in the understanding of the Indigenous oral health amongst the communities of both Boggabilla and Toomelah. Evidence of this is found within the entries recorded in the reflective journals. The following 2 quotes are examples:
  - “Students did not take the screenings seriously and thought it was somewhat normal to need ‘urgent treatment’. A lot of the students joined around saying ‘I want to get all my teeth out’ or ‘I want false teeth’ or ‘My teeth are rotten’.”
  - “A female student admitted she constantly got abscesses in her mouth but did nothing about it.”
  - “Before the dental service, as a nurse I saw decay, abscesses, and pain levels off the Richter scale.”

Discussion
- This project highlighted the high demand for dental services in the Indigenous communities of both Boggabilla and Toomelah.
- Hence, the ongoing support from dental and allied health professionals is paramount in order to help the population overcome these vital dental needs.

Conclusion
- Overall, this project was useful in the development of a future needs analysis. Dental disease is a huge concern amongst the Indigenous populations of Boggabilla and Toomelah.
- Ongoing oral health education within the school environment and a strategic oral health promotion plan for this entire region will be needed to enhance oral health knowledge outside the dental clinic.

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Acknowledgements

References