

Article Sharon Aris
Photography Boris Hlavica

It's as far from your stereotype of a rural dental practice as can be, yet Dr Greg Cocks has created a model for what's possible in the bush

A country practice

Red earthed and blue skied, backed by the mines and a long way from anywhere else, Broken Hill is the quintessential outback town. Unlike many slowly declining regional centres, its sweeping streets are being trod by an expanding tourism market which holds the promise of a diversified future for its 22,000 inhabitants. But while it may be rural heartland, there's a dental practice here challenging a lot of expectations. The image of rural dentistry is it's overworked and largely about drill and fill and emergency extractions, servicing a population that doesn't have the money, waiting time or notion to pay for better. You might be able to cling to that view so long as you don't visit Greg Cocks at The Dental Centre in Broken Hill, NSW.

Cocks has been providing sophisticated and extensive dental care in Broken Hill since he established the practice in 1984. An early adopter, in recent times he has acquired a cone beam scanner and in addition to general dentistry, he retains an interest in orthodontic treatment and offers a suite of other services including cosmetic whitening.

"People do have stereotypes of rural dentistry," admits Cocks, who acknowledges it is possible to find those

rundown country practices where people don't invest "and it's depressing for everyone".

But Cocks bristles at the notion that is how it has to be and has gone out of his way to develop a sophisticated surgery. "We've spent a couple of million building up this practice over 20 years. I'd like to think we're a model for what a remote rural dental practice can be."

Indeed, Cocks has pioneered the provision of an extensive array of treatments and products out of his sole practitioner practice including Invisaline, orthodontics for adults, implants, cerec crowns and onlays, lasers, air abrasion and bridges. He has also invested in some serious high-tech wizardry like the aforementioned cone beam scanner.

"Our vision is a beautiful smile for everyone," says Cocks.

"There's no reason you can't aspire to that for most patients. People will do what they can within their budget, even the most low-income battlers."

It's a model so impressive it was the first dental practice to win a Telstra Small Business Award, which the practice

claimed in 2001. "It meant a lot for Broken Hill—a small rural dental practice could win a high profile national business award," says Cocks. "Our patients took pride in the fact they were an integral part of such a successful business."

More than any other element, Cocks credits his staff for the practice's success. In fact, his practice structure has the unusually large ratio of 10 auxiliary staff to the one dentist, which also includes two hygienists. "I'd like people to think

"People will do what they can within their budget. Even the most low income battlers."

Dr Greg Cocks, The Dental Centre, Broken Hill



Dr Greg Cocks has pioneered a version of bush dentistry that embraces cutting-edge technology.



Dr Cocks (front) and his staff (from left to right): Ann Garrick, Narelle Crabb, Brianna Stenhouse, Liz Fenton, Kaleigh Guerin, Anne Campbell, Jazmine Viktor, Chris Denning, and Paula Harvey.

about me and my practice as a collaboration. The reason we're successful is our long-standing staff using effective systems. Clinically we try to use an holistic approach, focussing on the whole person, not just their teeth and gums.

"There are four words that sum up our practice philosophy: motivation, collaboration, education and innovation. Those words drive the sum of our business," says Cocks.

"Everyone at that practice could do any job in the practice."

Anne Campbell, dental hygienist, The Dental Centre, Broken Hill

Education particularly is the cornerstone on which the practice is built. Not only Cocks's but also his staff's—all are accredited radiographers, having been trained to operate the cone beam scanner and related software—and he encourages them to regularly undertake courses both in and away from the practice.

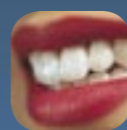
It's an approach that inspires an impressive staff loyalty. Anne Campbell, dental hygienist, has worked with Cocks for 21 years. "I've had a good range of experience in dental practice—before that I worked for 10 other dentists—and this practice is unique," she says. "I'll be there until the end. I don't think I could work for anyone else." She's not alone. Two other staff members have been with the practice as

long as Campbell and another couple are clocking up their seven years. Campbell says Cocks is a generous boss who, having a close family of his own, understands families of staff members come first and promotes flexibility like job-sharing. They also recruit from their patient base; the past three staff members previously having been orthodontic patients. "We get to know these kids and Greg encourages them to finish year 12 with a view to them then doing training as dental assistants or dental hygiene," says Campbell who underlines Cocks's commitment to education and training as the key to how the busy practice functions so successfully. "All of the staff at the practice are highly skilled. The DA's don't just sit there with the suction and hold it—he questions them. Everyone at that practice could do any job in the practice." This means, with two chairs running, the staff know what Cocks is going to do next and can educate the patients.

Campbell observes the innovation in what they're doing is apparent when people come to the practice to run courses, "They're not really teaching us things that haven't been instigated already. But these courses are very good for motivation—because motivation does wane—but really Greg is unique and that makes his practice very unique."

It's a sentiment also shared by his colleague Dr Martin Pynor, of Clare Dental. Pynor has known Cocks since their Adelaide University days. He's the first to agree Cocks is a maverick. "I think Greg is unusual not only from a rural

Confidence
Reliability
Esthetics



Empress® Direct

Direct Esthetic Composite

The only Direct Composite that could be called Empress!

- Exceptional handling
- Simplified application
- True-to-nature shades
- Superior polish



Competence in Composites

Lip & Cheek Retractor



OptraGate®

Adhesive



AdheSE® One F

Light Curing



bluephase®

Polishing



Astropol®

For further information please contact Helen Kesby on 03 9707 9624 or email helen.kesby@ivoclarvivadent.com.au

Come and see us at ADX10 stand # 86





Cocks, a “supergeneralist”, has inspired other rural colleagues.

practice perspective. He’s a supergeneralist. He’s prepared to make an investment pursuing that, spending on his practice, on training and on equipment.” Pynor says they’re of a similar mindset—a rural practice offers challenges that a city practice wouldn’t consider. He sees Cocks as an inspirational dentist, and has modelled many of the innovations in his own practice on things Cocks has done.

“He empowers his staff to a very high level,” observes Pynor. “He’s very switched on and involved with his staff—they have the opportunity to be very involved in the practice.” Pynor adds this is only possible because of the level of education Cocks undertakes himself. “He does lots of training and research. There’s always a reason behind what he does. You have to be a bit responsible with it as well because you’re the only one people go to,” which is to say, without that education, the trap is “you can extend yourself beyond what is ethically good for you to do.”

The best indicator of success however is in the return of visiting patients. Campbell observes that while Broken Hill is isolated, it’s far from cut-off and the practice averages two patients a day who are tourists, often grey nomads.

“Greg will fix them up and they’re usually heading to Alice Springs or Darwin but on the way back they’ll often have the treatment completed rather than waiting until they see their dentists at home. A lot comment, ‘My dentists in Sydney has none of this equipment’.”

For his part, Cocks, a regular host for dental students from Sydney, Adelaide and overseas as well as dental hygiene students from TAFE SA, nominates the return of students as professionals as a highlight, and cites with pride the young dental student from the UK who came over for a two-week rural elective in 1996, splitting his time between The Dental Centre and the local Royal Flying Doctor Service. “When he graduated he rang and asked for a job. I encouraged him to keep training, which he did. Now he’s been working for me part-time for three years, and also doing outreach in remote Aboriginal communities. So he gets the frontline treatment work and the occasional high-tech stuff working for me.” □



He’s been to Bali, too

In 2005 Cocks, along with his wife Lesley, dental hygienists Anne Campbell and Sue Rusealen and others, self-funded a trip to Bali to provide dental care to disadvantaged children and their carers in the island’s orphanage. They saw 403 patients, extracted 456 teeth and performed 14 surgical extractions, 113 porphys, 365 restorations and 392 fluoride treatments. Following this trip he helped set up the charity Senyum to provide oral health services to disadvantaged children in rural Australia and SE Asia. With the help of friends and colleagues, he’s organised a network of equipment that is stored in Bali, creating a mobile dental unit. “That way, if people are going to visit Bali for a holiday, we can provide equipment and they can provide a service for a few days as well,” says Cocks, and several dentists have taken up the opportunity to do just that. The next step is to build a medical centre with a dental chair and radiographic equipment. “Then we want to train some of the senior kids from the orphanage to be dental therapists. So they can work in the medical centre a couple of days a week and then work the other days treating general Indonesians.” □

EMBRACE CHANGE

before it embraces you

Australia’s largest dental exhibition
Sydney Convention and Exhibition
Centre, Darling Harbour

March 2010

Friday 26th 10am – 7pm

Saturday 27th 10am – 6pm

Sunday 28th 10am – 3pm

Before you know it, tomorrow is today. Developments in understanding compete with technological change in a global landscape that demands we adapt or perish.

ADX10 is the third ADX that has been organised by the ADIA and is an opportunity to update your practice through exposure to new ideas, technologies and solutions. Filling two exhibition halls with 120 dental supply exhibitors the event has grown substantially each year attracting more exhibitors and more visitors.

Register NOW

For a full program and speakers visit www.adia.org.au

SPEAKERS CORNER

- How posture affects your golf swing
- Finance options for your practice
- Antimimeticisomorphism
- Practice profitability improvement
- Succession planning for your practice
- Communication for increases case acceptance
- Dental surgery design

Free entry for the whole dental team

TOUCHING THE FUTURE

ADX10
exhibiting dental excellence