

Written by
Sat, 19 May 2012



Tara is a rural town about 280 kilometres west of Brisbane with a population of around 850. With unemployment rate of 10.9% and average weekly individual income of \$310, health care is a constant problem for its residents. Since 2007, this community has benefitted from the annual free dental clinics provided by a team of dedicated volunteers, who donate their time, skills, and resources to those without dental insurance or cannot afford treatment.

Tzu Chi Brisbane began its free dental service for rural Queensland in 2002. Our volunteers first went to Tara in 2007 supported by the Queensland Department of Health. From its inception, Queensland Health provided the facilities and medical supplies. Unfortunately, this assistance was stopped in 2010, causing cancellation of clinic that year. Undeterred, alternatives were explored. Consequently, we bought 6 portable dental chairs in mid 2011 at a total cost of \$65,000. These allowed us to resume our free clinic in June that year.



The 2012 annual clinic for Tara was held over the first weekend in May. Without government support, our additional tasks now encompassed sourcing of medical supplies and equipment,

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obtaining suitable venue for the clinic, accommodation for volunteers, set-up, liaison with patients, and numerous logistics issues which must be resolved prior to the arrival of the medical team.

These did not deter our volunteers. Typically, they tackled the challenge with Tzu Chi spirit of improvise, adapt, and overcome. With the rapport built up with local volunteers, all were resolved with the aim of maximising patients coverage in the time allowed. Non-medical volunteers also provided valuable support, including the long drive to deliver the dental chairs and x-ray equipment in advance, and set up the venue.



It is noteworthy to mention that among the dentists who volunteered this time, one came from as far as Perth. She went straight from the surgery to the airport to take a flight across the continent to join the team. Another two drove 7-8 hours to Tara to donate their skills. In the past, dental students from University of Queensland offered their service as dental assistants. On this occasion, they were joined by their counterparts from Griffith University. In addition to tasks mentioned before, other volunteers also took on catering duties, providing hot, nutritious meals for everyone. This was particularly welcome with outdoor temperature dropping to 30C at night. The facilitation provided by local volunteers was extremely valuable. They assessed patients' conditions and organised home visits for those unable to come to the clinic. Through the combined efforts of all involved, the event was a sounding success.

