

For richer or poorer

A significant number of the people who don't access dental services, public or private, simply can't do so. If it wasn't for David Digges and the NDF, they would fall through the cracks. **By Kerry Ramsey**

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“We didn't set out to change the world,” says Sydney-based dentist, Dr David Digges. “We're just trying to help the people who most need it.”

It was this simple but noble idea that inspired Dr Digges to donate his practice to charity for a couple of days a year. And the success of these volunteer days ultimately led to the founding of the National Dental Foundation [NDF].

The NDF operates Australia-wide to provide dental care for the most needy in society. Over the past seven years, it has provided millions of dollars of dental work to hundreds of underprivileged Australians. Its chair, Dr David Digges, started the organisation after working in East Timor in 2005.

“I was flying back into Australia having seen the desperate need in East Timor when I began wondering about my own backyard. Just what was the dental situation among the most needy in Australia?” pondered Dr Digges of Bellevue Hill Dental in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

He made contact with a number of charities, including the Sydney-based Youth Off The Streets and Matthew Talbot Homeless Services, and discovered a desperate need for dental care. So, in 2005, Dr Digges put aside one day in his practice to treat patients considered most in need. As he explains, both the patients and the charities involved were appreciative and his staff considered it a very positive experience.

“I was contacted by a few other dentists who had heard about what we had done and they offered to help next time.” And so the seed of an idea began to take root.

Around that time, Dr Digges was contacted by Melbourne-based Mervin Saultry, managing director of Dental Innova-

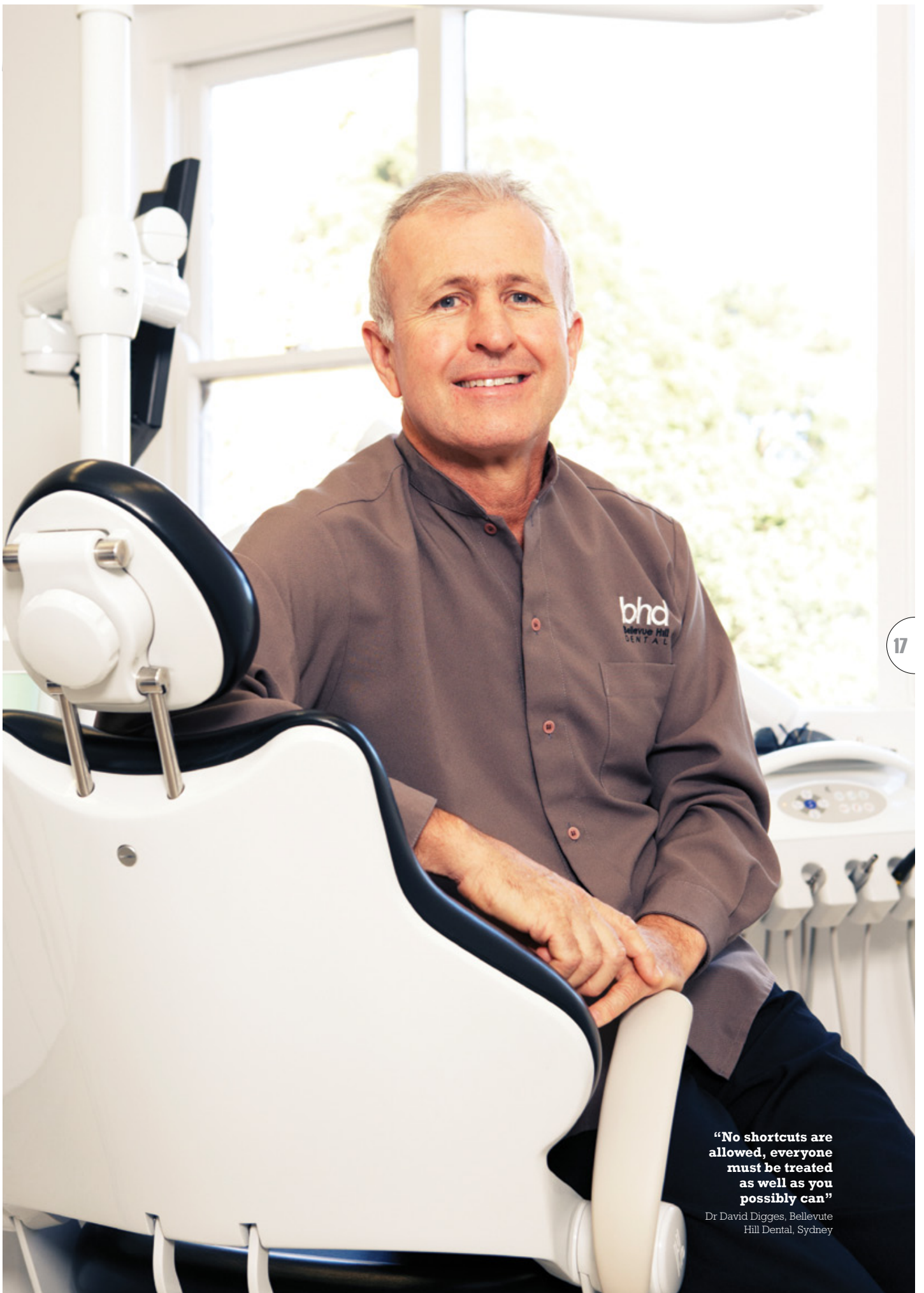
tions, a national commercial network of dentists who own and operate their own practices. Since Saultry had also seen a need and had a similar idea as Dr Digges, the two men joined forces and the National Dental Foundation [NDF] was formed in 2006. Within two years, they had a dozen other dentists helping in their own practices.

After developing the program in NSW and then amalgamating with Victoria under the banner of the NDF, the next necessity was to raise some much needed funds. Dr Digges met with The Trust Company, a philanthropic organisation that agreed that dental health of the needy was a serious cause. The directors helped fund the NDF for three years. Also, the Australian Dental Association [ADA] at state and federal levels has been supportive of the work and effort of all dentists involved with the NDF. On the corporate front, dental companies—particularly Henry Schein Halas, Colgate and Dentsply—offered great assistance by donating dental products. More recently, Wrigley's Foundation allocated some funding and the international Pierre Fauchard Academy have added their support. And in Victoria, the Lord Mayors' Trust Fund contributes generously.

Even though the NDF runs on a volunteer basis, money is needed for everything from dental materials to transporting patients to the various practices. Sometimes extra staff need to be employed because charity days are treated with same seriousness as any normal day at the practice. “No shortcuts are allowed, everyone must be treated as well as you possibly can,” says Dr Digges.

His proactive volunteering undoubtedly comes from his family background. His father, Dr Bryan Digges, was a dedicated dentist who practised until the year he died in 2003. “I could see it was a worthy profession and Dad never pushed me either way,” he says. “But when I did choose dentistry, he was very supportive.”

After graduating from the University of Sydney in 1981, he



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Dr David Digges, Bellevue Hill Dental, Sydney

practised in Newcastle, NSW—a very deliberate move to gain experience outside the family pastures. He then travelled to the UK to further his experience. A couple of years later, the time seemed right to return to Australia and work with his father.

“He was keen but once again, he didn’t push the issue. Once I was back in Sydney, I started working in our practice at Bellevue Hill.” At the same time, Dr Digges also set up and ran another practice in nearby Coogee. Although this was a much smaller operation, it was equally satisfying and very successful.

“Eventually, I reached a point where I needed to dedicate more of my time at Bellevue Hill,” he explains. “Dad was getting older and wanted to work a bit less. I felt blessed that we had a very happy working relationship for 20 years. He was a wonderful role model and dentist.”

Drawing on that familial work ethic, the NDF continued to grow under Dr Digges chairmanship—to the point that it’s not just dentists who volunteer. Dental technicians have offered to assist, making replacement teeth when required. If the patient needs preventive dental care, then there are hygienists and therapists also involved with the program.

The NDF operates by keeping the process of volunteering as simple as possible for their own management and for the dentists giving up their time. The dentists are asked to donate one or two days a year to treat charity patients vetted by a co-ordinator. Each patient is on a booked appointment and the co-ordinator has impressed on them to respect the dentist’s time and arrive promptly. “A lot of cases are people in desperate need with pain and suffering,” says Dr Digges. This, of course, begs the question, why don’t they get looked after at the dental hospital. It comes down to waiting lists and the ability of these people to access the care.

“Some of these people have been damaged by different circumstances of life. Some of them simply need a bit more tender loving care than can be given through the public system,” says Dr Digges. “Some have been affected by drugs, some by abuse, and some are people who have just had poor outcomes. All of them need a bit of a hand up, and if dentistry is part of the solution, then we’re happy to do it.”

There are now over 100 dentists Australia wide who donate their time and skill to the NDF. The overwhelming response by these dentists, says Dr Digges, is that it is a very positive experience—even if it can be draining at times.

“I’ve never thought we could change everything, however, I am very pleased that we can get to those people who are the most needy. It might just get someone a job or give them confidence to take part in society at a higher level.”

Dr Digges’ regular patients and his charity cases are both



It was a trip to East Timor in 2005 that inspired David Digges involvement with the National Dental Foundation.

Quote

Dr David Digges, Bellevue Hill Dental, Sydney

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benefitting from the recent refurbishment of his Bellevue Hill practice. Access was improved, sterilisation was upgraded, and the whole space was brought up to modern standards.

“I spent a lot of time with my associates studying and analysing what we needed to do in order to provide first-class dental care. At the same time, I didn’t want to go overboard and buy equipment that would be superseded in a short period of time.”

The outcome has been a rebuilt and redesigned practice that offers disabled access, state-of-the-art sterilisation facilities, new equipment throughout, cosmetic and hygiene rooms, along with digital OPG and Lat Ceph Radiology equipment.

As a man on the front lines, does Dr Digges have any insight into improving the dental health of our most needy citizens?

“I don’t think you can solve the dental problems of Australia by having a comprehensive dental scheme for every person. I think you need to target taxpayers’ money where it’s most needed. If the taxpayers’ money is spent with due respect, I think we can make a lot of impact on helping the people on public hospital waiting lists.”

Dr Digges continues, “If some of that money came through into private practice—as long as it’s responsibly spent—I think we can make a big and significant contribution.”

One easy way of targeting those most in need, he says,



Top: The team at Bellvue Hill Dental (David Diggs at far left). Above: Dr Heather Mueller at work in the surgery at Bellvue Hill Dental.

would be to fund a co-ordinator in each state and territory. In NSW, the Centre for Oral Health Strategies employs Carolyn Walsh to act as a contact point between charities and dentists. In short, she sets up appointments, liaises with the charities while spelling out their responsibilities, and ensures dentists are aware of who they are seeing.

According to Dr Digges, this system has worked extremely well. Ideally, a co-ordinator could be employed in each state, and funding for this has been requested from the federal government. By having the repeat situation in each state, there would be some degree of certainty in knowing that a good co-ordination process was in place. "It is a great tribute to the Centre of Oral Health Strategies and Carolyn Walsh that the NSW model has worked so well," says Dr Digges.

It's very easy for dentists to get involved with the NDF. "They can donate their services or their practices for one or two days a year. We are also more than happy to take donations of equipment or money. You don't always hear the good stories, but I've seen many dentists who volunteer for this program year after year without expecting anything in return," says Dr Digges. "I really think these are the good people who make the dental profession shine." □

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