

# Brisbane, Australia

May 5~7, 2012

## Free Dental Clinic in Tara

Written by Yao-Nan Huang

The year 2012, marked TIMA Australia's fifth free dental clinic event in rural Tara, Australia. The notable difference on this trip was that the Department of Health in Australia could no longer offer support to TIMA and its free clinic effort. In the past, TIMA was only responsible for mobilizing medical staff and volunteers while local government arranged for medical equipment, medicine and medical insurance. Nowadays, due to budget cuts or change in government policy and regulations, all government support had been discontinued.

## Good Samaritans Turning Crisis Around

Despite the lack of government support, Tzu Chi's Brisbane volunteers took sole responsibility in organizing the free clinic. Since last year, they had procured military examination chairs, purchased medicine, and reserved free clinic locations. But the most challenging step was to contact more than a hundred



First group of volunteers inspecting setup, assembling and checking dental equipment and lighting.

patients who needed dental exams. Efficiency in booking patients would ensure the best use of the event resources and maximize number of patients served.

Dr. Jerry Wu, who was in charge of the free dental clinic team, stated that Tzu Chi's volunteering effort is well-respected globally so people were willing to sacrifice vacation and pay for their own tickets to fly from Perth to Brisbane to help in the clinic. A dentist couple who helped last year also drove seven to eight hours to Brisbane to participate. Other participants also included dentists from other locations and dental students from University of Queensland as well as Griffith University. TIMA members were encouraged by the increased participation of local dental volunteers.

More exciting news came when Cathy Higgirs, a community nurse, volunteered to help TIMA members with chores of answering phone calls, finding a free event location as well as making all accommodation for non-native TIMA members. Cathy's help saved much time otherwise needed if all work was to be done alone by Tzu Chi team. She personally called patients to get their dental history and booked all the appointments.



**Cathy Higgirs, a local nurse, being interviewed by Da Ai TV. Cathy is instrumental in making this event a reality by contacting patients, finding free event location as well as arranging accommodation for non-native TIMA members.**

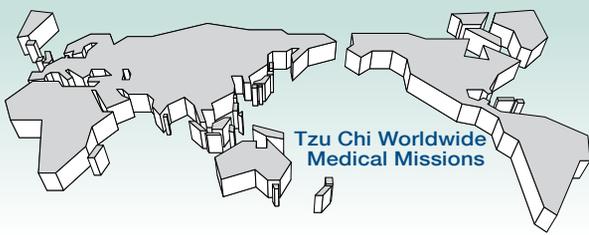
She knew how desperate local students needed dental care, so she scheduled a day for them to get treatment. Tzu Chi volunteers were ecstatic to see local residents' joining the free clinic effort and hoped she would inspire others to cultivate wisdom and compassion in the world.

### **Small Efforts Add Up; Local Residents Step Up to Help**

With the help of local volunteers, TIMA members still needed to move and set up equipment themselves. Tzu Chi volunteers Tien-Yu Chang and Hsin-Yin Fu took off ahead of others and drove the hybrid van on May 4 to transport six military dental examine chairs and x-ray machines. They ran into a big rain storm near Toowoomba and noticed incoming cars kept on flashing their headlights at them. They pulled over several times to examine the van and finally realized that the van was tilted up due to the heavy equipment on the back, turning their regular headlight into high beam affecting incoming cars. They had no choice but to reduce the speed so it took

them more than five hours for an otherwise three-hour trip to reach Tara. It was past midnight by the time they unloaded all equipment from the van.

To save the cost of accommodation, Dr. Jerry Wu and other volunteers slept on the floor of the clinic location at night. The standby team set up tent outside, where it was around 3°C, to allow the culinary team to prepare for breakfast in the morning. Even though everyone suffered from poor sleep, the volunteers' spirits were lifted after they heard the talk from Dr. Bin-Bin Shi from Perth. Dr. Shi said that, years ago, before she was a dental student, she had a chance to hear Dr. Yin-Shing Lu's talk and was inspired by Tzu Chi's operations. During her sophomore dental internship, she recognized that her ideals were very close to that of Tzu Chi's mission and decided to become more involved in the organization to integrate her dream and Tzu Chi's mission as one. Hence, for this 3-day holiday, she decided to use her vacation to fly out here to Brisbane to assist in the free dental clinic event. Bin-Bin's selfless determination is truly an inspiration for all. Afterwards, Dr. Jerry Wu reported on number of patients seen on May 5th and the fact that some patients had to wait six hours before getting treatment. Despite their fatigue bodies, the smiles never left volunteers' faces. The effort might be miniscule and futile but we believe that it can have a positive influence



on the community.

Volunteer Chuan-Hsui Hung, who used to work at a TV station as a technical lighting professional, joined Tzu Chi when his children attended Tzu Chi Humanitarian School. Since then, he took on many works that require his skills. He



**Dr. Wu, who is in charge of the dental team, uses every minute efficiently in order to treat more patients.**



**The first day of the free clinic event is for children. Dr. Shih sacrifices her three-day vacation to help TIMA with this event.**

worked on lightings for the sign language drama “Sutra of Immeasurable Meanings”. In Tara town he worked on plumbing in the free clinic restrooms as well as managing two dental air compressors. When others complimented his patience and handy work in fixing the compressors, he modestly pointed out the real heroes were the dentists who worked nonstop for long hours, in order to treat more patients.

Tzu Chi’s Brisbane Service Center coordinator, Tsao Su, stated that because the Australian government withdrew all governmental support for the free clinic, local Tzu Chi volunteers had to raise money beforehand for the event while medical insurance costs would be covered by Australian Tzu Chi Foundation’s umbrella insurance policy. The process of arranging the free clinic is complicated, but local volunteers’ joined effort made this event a reality.

For the past few years, many local residents also joined TIMA members for the event. Ms. Freda videotaped herself reciting a poem to Dharma Master Cheng Yen; Ms. Jenny donated home grown vegetables; Ms. Joanne brought in a pumpkin which was larger than an average child. These three local volunteers became receptionists, walked patients to one of the six examination rooms and called to schedule home visits to treat those who were not able to come.

## Take the Initiative to Spread Love

TIMA and Tzu Chi volunteers traveled more than 400 kilometers to Tara, but there were still people on the waiting-list to be seen so Tzu Chi volunteers called these people in advance, so the doctors could determine the urgency of their problem. If the pain was acute and persistent, Tzu Chi volunteers would appoint a dentist for a home visit. For others, arrangements were made to have them stop by on the last day of free clinic for treatment. A total of six home dental visits were made during the two-day clinical event.

The month of May is a special time for Tzu Chi volunteers because the second Sunday of May is the Buddha's Birthday, Mother's Day and Tzu Chi Day. Through this free clinic event, Brisbane Tzu Chi volunteers showed their appreciation for this special month with action. Local volunteer representative and attorney, Noel Birch, shared a speech during the tea ceremony on the last day. He jokingly pointed out that the great deeds he performed as a volunteer of Tzu Chi included waking up "late" at 5 a.m. every day and becoming a vegetarian. As the audience laughed at his humor, all the hardship and challenges seemed to be worthwhile when a special bond was created over the opportunity to improve the local community. As a devoted



**Tzu Chi Youth volunteer becomes the ideal baby sitter while they wait to be treated.**

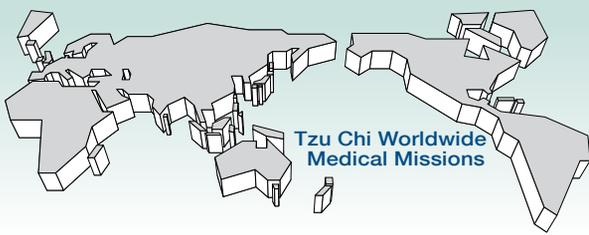


**An elderly lady writes a thank you card for the dentist after receiving her treatment.**

Catholic himself, Noel approved of Tzu Chi's way of "go out and help someone" and taking initiatives.

On the last day, Dr. Wu encouraged everyone to charge to the last minute. He also thanked the behind-the-scene supporters who allowed the free dental clinic to take place. Sister Tsoa Su announced that Tzu Chi had been raising money with selling vegetarian wraps after the Queensland government pulled the funds for this event. She also handed out certificate of appreciation for the dental clinic team members.

Everyone who participated or have



been treated for the two day event gathered in the lobby for “Return of Bamboo Banks” to pay respect to the solemn 2011 Buddha Bathing Ceremony. Under the electrifying atmosphere, Tzu Chi volunteer Hsin-Yin Fu shared the significance of this three-in-one holiday for Tzu Chi. As long as you are mindful of the Buddha in your heart, you do not have to go far to look for kindness and peace. Tzu Chi also shared the English version of Global Tzu Chi Almanac to help local residents understand Tzu Chi’s global contribution in 2011. Local resident Chris, moved by Tzu Chi’s work, stood up to pray and stayed afterwards to discuss Buddhism and Tzu Chi missions with the volunteers.

The three-day clinic left little time for the dentists to eat. They wanted to spend every moment possible to treat patients so maximum number of people could be served. In response to Tzu Chi’s teaching of eat to 80% full and donate 20% to help others, Tzu Chi culinary team prepared meals mainly of small but nutritious portions so that volunteers can have a quick bite before treating the next patient. The most popular items were vegetarian wraps and sweet red bean dessert plus a cup of tea or coffee before the next patient. During the three-day free clinic a total of 161 people were treated, including 110 adults and 51 children. Treatments included 171 people for cavity fillings and



**A three-time volunteer for the event, Noel Birch, shares his learning. A Catholic, Noel whole-heartedly agrees with Tzu Chi’s mission.**



**All free clinic volunteers and their patients gather at the lobby to return the bamboo banks and pass on their love.**

54 extractions. Through this exchange, not only did it benefit the locals, it also spread Tzu Chi missions through the triage of Sutra, Tzu Chi and Buddha Birthday to inspire more people to join the effort and cultivate seeds of love in the town of Tara.