

Dentistry on wheels

A converted truck and heart for rural townships led Dr Jalal Khan outside his comfort zone

By Danny Chan

When dentists are asked to think out of the box, the usual ideas pop up: email marketing, internet marketing, E-referral campaigns, etc. Less humdrum ones go like this: Send festive cards to patients install Espresso machine at waiting area, incorporate laser dentistry, etc.

By comparison, Dr Jalal Khan's moment of epiphany truly went beyond the boxed confines of a typical dental surgery. He decided to purchase a fully kitted out mobile clinic from a retiring dentist, so that he could "bring dentistry out to parts of Australia that receive little attention from the dental profession".

About 18 months ago, the practice principal of The Dental Station officially launched the mobile chapter of his then 3-year-old North Sydney practice. The Dental Truck opened for business in Outback Australia – or more specifically, Quilpie, a small town in South-west Queensland with a population of 595.

Quilpie is also the "mobile headquarters" where the truck is stationed

and from where it drives into other remote towns that Dr Khan has designated as regular stops: Cunnamulla (population: 1,140); Thargomindah (population: 270); Windorah (population: 158) and Bourke (population: 1,824). The towns were specifically picked for not having access to a local dentist, Dr Khan intones: "That restricts us to very small rural and remote towns which is fine by me."

The greater motivation was to go to places stuck at the meagre end of Australia's unevenly distributed healthcare services, which he contends, is a festering problem wrought by limited State and Federal funding as well as lack of resources.

"Prior to The Dental Truck, people in these towns had to travel 3-4 hours just to get to the nearest dentist. The economic costs of seeing a dentist for them was really exorbitant in both time and financial costs – in most cases, we're talking drought-stricken farmers with limited resources to begin with."

"As a result, they tend to put off dental visits. We regularly see patients who haven't been to a dentist in 10, 15 years – many with severe ailments."

And it's not just dental services these rural towns lack, Dr Khan reminds us, but many basic services metro dwellers take

for granted simply do not make it to the Outback.

Meanwhile, Dr Khan's efforts reaching out to Queensland health authorities – outlining the seriousness of the situation while requesting for funding support or collaboration – have been received with mixed results. Administrative tasks relating to the submission of public health vouchers are long-winded. However, he reports "I've had some productive dialogue with some of the various Hospital and Health Services in Queensland, which promises to deliver some positive outcomes for locals in these towns."

While Dr Khan has drastically reduced travelling time for his patients' dental visits, his own traveling time to the office has increased exponentially. Quilpie is a good 13- to 14-hour drive inland, although through connecting flights and land travel, the itinerant dentist has managed to reduce it down to a more manageable 8 hours.

The logistical costs also add up. Flights, accommodation and meals for the dental team, in addition to parking and truck transfer fees run in the thousands. "All this expenditure even before you get to a single patient."

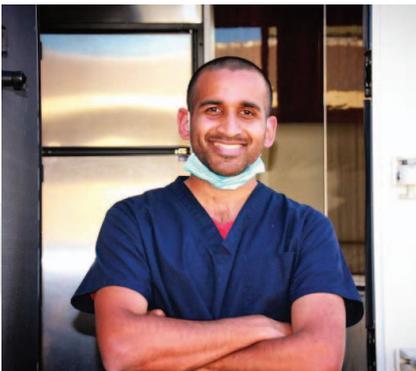
Sustaining Dr Khan through the pressures of maintaining a new start-up is a supportive family – he is married with a 2-year-old son – and renewed sense of vocation.

"I wanted to move out of the comfort zone and challenge myself clinically with a great community initiative," he recalls his original motivations, "I couldn't have done it without the support of my wife."

What was initially a giddy mix of adventurism and quixotic notions of mobile dentistry has given way to weightier considerations.

"Seeing first-hand the deterioration of the dental situation in these towns has made me more keenly aware of my role, first and foremost, as a healthcare provider," the 31-year-old contemplates. "In many ways, The Dental Truck has evolved into a public health initiative."

Although The Dental Truck remains



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When work becomes a passion it leads to excellence



Profile of Dr Gunjan Bangia and Dr Ravi Bangia new practice

For the past decade, husband and wife team, Dr Gunjan and Dr Ravi Bangia had a vision for a new standard of care within the dental sector. This vision came into being in 2016 when they opened their state of the art combined dental and anaesthetic practice, New Age in Bundoora, in north eastern suburb of Melbourne.

Gunjan and Ravi's vision was rewarded this month by the Department of Health as they became the first ever general dental practice in Australia to be recognised as a Day Procedure Centre by the Australian Department of Health and Human Services.

Dr Ravi Bangia is a registered anaesthetic consultant at some of

Melbourne's leading private hospitals and practicing ICU consultant at Austin Health. Dr Gunjan Bangia is a general dentist who was recognised for her work within the public dental sector as part of the Public Oral Health Awards by the Dental Health Services Victoria in 2015.

"For years we would often discuss the need for general anaesthesia in dentistry and the challenges with safety standards having patients under GA in a standard dental practice," says Gunjan.

Their vision was to create a facility that provides the highest standards of care, comfort and above all safety within the dental sector. Getting the Department of Health's tick of approval is testimony to the fact they have achieved their vision.

Initially, the New Age facility in Bundoora was used to treat Gunjan's private patients, but the goal was always to allow general and specialist dentists access to the day procedure environment and since receiving the Department of Health certification, general and specialist dentists who want to treat their patients under GA now have access to a world class facility to do so.

Unlike using a hospital to treat patients under GA, New Age provides a high-class, boutique environment – purpose build with the highest standards of both dental and anaesthetic technology available.

"Patients simply love visiting the practice and tell us they feel far less anxious in our comfortable and friendly surroundings than they do when they have to visit a hospital," says Ravi.

At a time when both the expectations of the public and also the authorities are increasing, a time when medical litigation is on the rise and at a time when providing elevated levels of care is a great way of expanding the scope of a dental practice, the New Age facility ticks all the boxes.

If you are a general or specialist dentist who wants to offer a GA facility to your patients, then you may want to meet with Dr Ravi Bangia to discuss the services available and to view the New Age practice.

The New Age day procedure facility is yet another example of how the Australian dental sector continues to improve the standards within the profession for the greater good of the public. ♦

Specialist anaesthetist Dr Ravi Bangia can be contact on info@newagedental.com.au or by calling 03 9467 6759.

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a commercial enterprise – running two mobile teams that serve four towns – Dr Khan says he has received private donations and other forms of assistance.

"We do not charge exorbitant fees so we depend entirely on the locals to keep the business afloat."

"Donations would help us to reduce the financial burden and carry on providing the much needed service. Dental volunteers, or those willing to work for

less-than-market rates, are more than welcomed. With more people on board, we can bring the service to more towns."

Asked for how he would convince others to move outside their comfort zones to serve in rural locations, Dr Khan shares: "For me, the reward is getting to see a part of Australia you don't often see and meeting people you don't normally meet."

As for advice that he would give fellow dentists who feel stuck in a 9-to-5 job, Dr

Khan says thoughtfully:

"Do not get bogged down by the commercial side of things or lose sight of your main role as healthcare providers."

"Be willing to take risks, reinvent yourself in today's very competitive environment and think outside the box!" ♦

If you would like to get involved with, support or learn more about The Dental Truck, visit www.thedentalstation.com.au