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Starting school
Meet the new head of our newest dental school

Reaching out
The oral health of indigenous people in remote communities is a scandal. What can be done?
Starting school

Charles Sturt University has a new head of dentistry. Professor Ward Massey talks to Rachel Davis about his new role, his international experience and his vision for the future.

"We have a wonderful opportunity to create a world-class dental school, but at the same time work with the problems that are unique to rural Australian dentists," explains recently appointed head of dentistry and health sciences at Charles Sturt University (CSU), Professor Ward Massey.

"Our school will not only provide excellent teaching and research facilities, but the dispersed clinical model will provide students with the opportunity to work in rural locations."

CSU received a grant in the 2007 federal budget for $85.1m to establish a new School of Dental and Oral Health, and Professor Massey and his team are overseeing the development of its state-of-the-art facilities. "We are hoping to finish construction at our Orange campus by the end of February 2009," he says. "It will be a flagship building for CSU—the main facility for the dental school—and one of five sites, with the others being Albury, Bathurst, Dubbo and Wagga Wagga. The Wagga building is also scheduled for opening in 2009 and the other three sites should be completed by 2010."

Each new facility will include clinical chairs where the students will gain experience by providing discounted treatments for patients—but they will also have two or more chairs made available to private dentists.

"This is common practice in North America—chairs are provided for private or intramural practice and students have an opportunity to observe or assist. We expect specialists will also use the facilities, allowing for a higher level of integration with students, as well as providing an important revenue stream for the new school."

Professor Massey has first-hand experience of American universities, having recently returned to Australia from the University of Maryland, where he was a professor in restorative
"One of the most exciting aspects of the initiative is the chance to build new programs in rural areas, which will have a long-lasting impact on the health and wellbeing of Australia’s many inland communities. It’s a wonderful opportunity."

dentistry at the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery.

"After graduating from the University of Adelaide, I worked in private practice, as well as under the government’s dental system. I received my PhD at the University of Sydney and then worked in Sydney, Western Australia and Adelaide, but moved to the US in 2001. I was initially based at the University of Maryland but also spent two years working at Harvard University before finally returning to Baltimore."

Professor Massey explains he was part of the team involved in developing and rolling out Maryland’s new dental school building. "It was the largest ever financial commitment by the university, and their most expensive building. It was a really exciting facility where we developed simulation and pre-clinical facilities, including state-of-the-art dental chairs and equipment. To be involved in another greenfields project is a wonderful opportunity, but one of the most exciting aspects of the initiative is the chance to build a new program in rural areas, which will have a long-lasting impact on the general health and wellbeing of Australia’s inland communities."

Professor Massey’s vision for the new dental school at CSU includes a strong element of community involvement.

"We are negotiating space in the building for use by radiologists, dental laboratories and specialist clinicians who will provide a service to both the students and local practitioners who don’t have comparable facilities or expertise," he says.

"We have had a really good response from local dentists, who were initially concerned about the competition. I am confident that we can work together to provide services to local communities and, hopefully, tap into the segment of the population that is not currently receiving treatment."
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NEW DENTAL SCHOOL

New research conducted by CSU shows there is a large group of people in the community who are not eligible for government-assisted dental care and often don't receive adequate treatment as a result.

Research by CSU shows there is a large group of people in the community who are not eligible for government-assisted dental care and don't receive adequate treatment as a result.

"We will offer reduced fee scales to encourage this segment of the local population to seek dental treatment. Griffith University is currently offering this service and doing so with great success. Our aim is to also build a strong relationship with the NSW Health Service and eventually be viewed as an additional string to its bow."

The regional locations of CSU's School of Dental and Oral Health—and particularly its multi-campus model—means that the new school's relationship with local practitioners is of paramount importance.

"We want the university to be a source of support and improve the quality of rural dentists' working lives, as well as graduating oral health practitioners who have the core skills and knowledge base to work successfully in their own rural practice," he says.

Professor Massey points out that rural or regional dentistry is often significantly different to the work performed in an urban practice.

"Rural practitioners need to be confident and independent, as well as being able to manage the trauma, periodontal, restorative and surgical procedures that urban dentists would frequently refer on to a specialist. Rural patients also tend to present less frequently for treatment and so the work that is required can often be more complex."

"Special needs patients are also frequent attenders. We want to establish long-term links with our graduates—whether they are rural or urban practitioners—that end up providing long-term support networks, including online help services, academic resources, professional support and advice," he explains.

After initially being warned that it would be hard to attract quality academic staff to the new dental school because of its regional location, Professor Massey says this fear has so far been unfounded.

"It's an exciting project and a great environment to live and work in and I'm confident that we are well on the way to securing the appointments we need."