

# Bite

BETTER BUSINESS FOR DENTISTS

## This man is not a dentist

But his company has taken thousands of patients off public dental waiting lists. Meet Glenn Keys and Aspen Medical: the company governments turn to to fix their health problems.

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Article Rob Johnson  
Photography Richard Birch

Glenn Keys is not a dentist. But his company has treated thousands of patients on public dental waiting lists in Victoria, New South Wales, and the Northern Territory.

# The fixer

**Y**ou may not have heard of Glenn Keys or his company, the benignly-named Aspen Medical, but you would have heard of his work. When Australian Federal Police went to the Solomon Islands several years ago, Aspen Medical provided healthcare support to them. They did the same for the ADF in East Timor. Back in 2006, when Caboolture

Hospital in Queensland shut down its emergency department due to lack of staff, it was Aspen Medical that went in and got it running again. When East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta was injured in a botched assassination attempt, he was treated by Aspen Medical staff before evacuation to Australia.

More specifically, in 2006 Aspen worked with Dental Health Services Victoria, providing assistance in clearing three years' worth of that state's waiting lists. In New South Wales the company treated 5,500 patients from the waiting list over the course of six months, and has worked with Justice Health doing dental checks in correctional facilities.

So when the NT Department of Health and Families, Oral Health Services put out a call for someone to help them reduce dental waiting lists by a third, "We responded to it citing the experience we've got in other sites and were able to be successful," says Aspen general manager Glenn

Keys. "We've cleared waiting lists in both New South Wales and Victoria, and that's given us a good background and understanding of how to do it. So we could bring that experience to bear in this case."

Aspen's work with public dental waiting lists in the Northern Territory complements another project the company runs on behalf of the NT government, the Remote Area Health Corps (RAHC). The RAHC provides health care (including dental work) for remote Aboriginal communities through the Territory, and as of last December, it had recruited 39 dental professionals for temporary placements

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Glenn Keys, general manager, Aspen Medical

across the Territory. "Because we can provide dental professionals, we are able to help Aboriginal Health services open chairs that have sat around unused," says Keys. "Knowing we can help in that way is a brilliant thing."

For much of the last year, the Federal and Territory governments have been particularly concerned with how to tackle the Northern Territory's unique dental problems, especially amongst the Indigenous population. A report in *The Australian* newspaper from April last year noted that the Government review into the Northern Territory emergency

## Profile



Keys established Aspen seven years ago, and it has experienced rapid growth since then—it's one of Australia's most successful private companies.

Intervention identified dental neglect as the most widespread health problem among Aboriginal youngsters in remote communities. About 44 per cent of the thousands of children who underwent medical checks during the rollout of the controversial intervention had untreated tooth decay or other oral health problems.

A third of those sampled were referred for dental care, but health check follow-ups appeared to be "sporadic, unpredictable and determined more by the availability of specialists and funding constraints rather than the child's health needs", the review report found.

A spokeswoman for the Health Department told the newspaper the agency "recognised that the model of follow-up dental care at present is limited".

She said the problem lay with the design—not the funding—of the services.

So who is Glenn Keys, and why can his company tackle

problems that successive governments seem incapable of fixing?

**A**spen Medical is the brainchild of Keys—a former aeronautical engineer—and medical practitioner Dr Andrew Walker. In less than seven years it has grown to over 450 staff located in Australia and internationally.

Aspen was founded to provide services to government and private organisations that require outsourced healthcare solutions. Generally this means providing medical services to remote, inaccessible areas or locations where the need for health services is at a premium.

**"It's not about reducing the high-quality care provided by area health people, it's about working with them to provide additional options."**

*Glenn Keys, general manager, Aspen Medical*

Established in 2003, based in Canberra, Australia, the company has experienced rapid growth over the past six years, and was recognised by the 2009 *BRW* Private Business Awards as the Most Successful Private Company in Australia with a turnover under \$100 million.

As far back as 2003, Aspen was finding ways of helping patients in regional and remote areas while balancing the delicate politics around public health. Back then they worked with councils in country NSW to trial a mobile medical facility to help reduce waiting times for health services including dental work. At the time, Keys was quoted as saying the mobile medical unit would deliver "only those services ... where there is unmet demand and with complete consultation and integration with local healthcare providers.

"It's not about reducing the high-quality care provided by area health people, it's about working with them to provide additional options and solutions to meet the needs of local people."

Nonetheless, services such as those provided by Aspen have a tendency to make some observers nervous. When the company went into Caboolture hospital, for example, some commentators were quick to criticise the cost of Aspen's services. And although it's more a question for government or health departments than for Keys, it is worth asking: if funding for State and Territory dental programs is so poor, how can they still afford to bring in a private contractor like Aspen Medical to fix their waiting lists?

"It's not for me to say," Keys points out, "but I would have thought that if you've got vacancies in the program which are



Aspen can tackle problems like waiting lists because they have a large pool of health professionals they can deploy at any time.

not being filled, then you can do a cost-benefit analysis of our services and perhaps find the money from accrued but unspent salaries. But that's just my estimate as to one way you could do it.

"Another thing worth noting is we have a clear and set program around volume, with a clear start-date and end-date. So if you present that to staff, saying you start at this point, work twice as hard as normal and finish at this point, people are happy to do that. Whereas they may be less happy to just be told, 'work twice as hard'. So in answer to your question, you would have to ask the government, but I

**Keys points out the company can bring to bear a wide range of experiences in dealing with waiting lists generally, as well as their specific dental experience.**

would have thought that would be one way."

Even with such an arrangement, Aspen would surely face the same problem health services all over the country face—a lack of available skilled staff. It's not like they can make dentists appear-out of thin air.

"We've got a large pool of health professionals we can draw upon," Keys counters. "We provide dental care for Defence and the AFP in the Solomon Islands and Timor, and we also provide dental care for Defence in Victoria, Far

North Queensland and the whole of WA. All of those people are working for us full-time, or are on our records, so we can offer them a broad range of services and opportunities."

**K**ey points out the company can bring to bear a wide range of experiences in dealing with waiting lists generally, as well as their specific dental experience. When they were responding to the tender from NT Health, he says, they drew upon experience from the UK and Ireland, where the company dramatically reduced surgery waiting lists for ophthalmology, orthopaedic and urology surgery. "Having said that, dental is unique," he adds, "so we took those surgical lessons and what we had learned about dental work, and brought those together in a holistic package."

He also says that Aspen's approach is to attach waiting lists from the 'other' side, so to speak—while many public dentists spend a lot of their time doing emergency work, Aspen's brief is "about getting a disease-free, healthy mouth".

"A lot of it is people who might have an abscess or sore tooth, which may not be classified as emergency work, but people who have been waiting for some time. What we're doing is working with NT dental, working out as to how those patients are processed, so the biggest issue is actually one of coordination." He adds that Aspen staff are required to meet their own credentialing and operational standards as well as those of NT DHF, as set out in the tender documents, and that the team will begin treatments once lists have been finalised by the Department. □