

Leaving a legacy

Striking images and stories from last year's Anzac Day prompted Adelaide's Dr Steve Mason into action to support military families in need. One year on, Legacy Smiles looks set to go nationwide.

By **John Burfitt**

If a picture is said to paint a thousand words, it also has to be said the power of a picture can also bring about real change.

In the case of Dr Steve Mason of Adelaide, it was not one picture but two of them that moved him so dramatically and prompted him into action over the past 12 months. The result of his efforts is the creation of South Australia's Legacy Smiles dental program.

The pictures that so moved Dr Mason were in fact TV news reports that played out within days of each other in the lead-up to Anzac Day 2013. One was about an author recounting his own childhood experiences with Legacy, the organisation which offers support to families suffering after the incapacitation or death of a parent in the defence forces.

The other was the image of decorated Victoria Cross winner, Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, marching in an Anzac Day parade, holding the hands of two children who had lost parents on the battlefield.

Dr Mason, who served in the Royal Australian Air Force Undergraduate scheme as he studied dentistry at the University of Adelaide before a seven-year career as a RAAF dentist, rejoined the reserves in 2003. During his time as

the lives of the people left behind and still suffering long after the war has finished.

"It was a powerful reminder that there are kids out there who have lost a parent, and with three children of my own, it made me think of how these families

Quote

Dr Steve Mason, Adelaide

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a RAAF dentist he lost three colleagues in separate peacetime training exercises and the tales of families coping with the realities of life after war struck close to his own heart.

He says both TV news reports had a dramatic impact, and he decided to do something which could be of benefit to

were coping," Dr Mason, 48, recalls.

"Whenever I used to think of Legacy, it would be of the widows left behind, but I realised there were children as well. That thought put a seed in my head about what I could do, as a dentist, to help these children; kids whose parent had paid the ultimate price serving

Dr Steve Mason wanted to do something to help the children of people who had paid the ultimate price for their country.





Dr Mason with a patient in his Adelaide surgery.

our country. I then began to wonder how many children were in need, because we have been through so many conflicts in recent years when Australian lives have been lost. This is a simple way to honour the service of the parent who has passed away."

In total, 58 Australian lives have been directly lost during recent campaigns in East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, Solomon Islands, Indonesia and Fiji. Many others have subsequently passed away or been profoundly incapacitated as a consequence of their operational service.

Dr Mason's idea was to create a health-care service called Legacy Smiles, which would offer free-of-charge dental care to any child under 18 years of age from a Legacy supported family.

His own links to the military stretch back over 100 years. His great grandfather was killed in France in battle during World War I, and his grandfather served in the Air Force during World War II. Following seven years as a RAAF dentist, Dr Mason purchased his own practice, Walkerville Dental in inner Adelaide, in 1998. These days, as a reservist, he spends 30 days every year working with the Air Force in his capacity as a Wing Commander.

Quote

Rainer Jozeps, CEO, Legacy South Australia

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In those weeks after Anzac Day last year, Dr Mason wasted no time acting upon the grand plan of dental care for military families in need. He made contact with various dental colleagues to discuss his idea and was met with universal support. He next wrote an article in the Australian Dental Association's SA newsletter about his planned scheme and asked for volunteers. In a short time, five other dentists, three orthodontists, an oral surgeon and a paedodontist all signed on.

"It was really heartwarming and encouraging to find this kind of response from dentists who were so willing to volunteer their time to play a part in this," he says.

Among the dental practitioners to sign on included Drs Stephen Langford, Colin Twelftree, Jonathan Ashworth, Janet Scott, Michael Malandris, Alan Mann, Kevin Ward, Richard Wilkie, Joanne

Kimpton and Guy Freeman. "I have a fundamental belief that all dentists are in the privileged position of being able to help other people, and we do that for a fee," he says. "But we also have the ability to help people who are less fortunate than us and do not have the capacity to pay.

"In Legacy, there are children who have lost a parent and might well be living in a tough situation, financially and emotionally. If we have the capacity to do something to help, then it doesn't take much to do that."

With his scheme quickly taking shape, it was in June that Dr Mason approached the South Australian branch of Legacy with his Legacy Smiles idea, to determine if they were even interested in the scheme and if there was indeed a need.

Rainer Jozeps, the CEO of Legacy South Australia, says he was over-

whelmed by not only the concept, but that Dr Mason had already put so much work into making Legacy Smiles happen.

"This scheme is the brainchild of a practitioner in the field, who already had secured a lot of support of his colleagues," Jozeps says. "For us, there is nothing better than it coming from the sector itself. The whole scheme starts with a very different energy.

"We have 40 families with children aged from three years of age that we help support, and dental health is a big issue if you are struggling financially and can be prohibitive. When we have told some of our families about the Legacy Smiles scheme with local dentists, they are amazed. They never thought they would get this kind of service for free."

Within a matter of weeks, Dr Mason saw at his own practice the first two patients of the Legacy Smiles scheme. Since then, another six children have been treated, including one patient who is receiving full orthodontic care, completely free of charge.

"I eventually had to close off our books as we got to the point where we had more dentists than we did children, and that is a great situation to be in," Dr Mason says.

"I have spoken with some of the other dentists in the scheme and so far all the children have been fine and far from any dental disasters. The only trend we noted among them is a lower frequency of dental care visits, as dentistry often becomes the last thing on the mind of a parent who is in crisis."

With Legacy Smiles now heading towards its first anniversary, the relative ease of setting up the program and its subsequent success is under close review throughout all the state Legacy groups, with plans to implement the scheme throughout Australia. Nationally, Legacy currently cares for 1900 children.

"While we are still considering Legacy Smiles as a trial program, I can tell you it has been a complete success," Rainer Jozeps says with enthusiasm. "What this trial has done is encourage everyone to look towards a national program, and I think if it went into the other states and territories, the other Legacy groups would be excited by it.

"I recently met with all the Legacy CEOs, and we agreed this program will easily be transferred. In fact, they are



Dr Mason with Rainer Jozeps (centre, rear), CEO of the Legacy Club of Adelaide, with Legacy Smiles patients Joey and Piper.

all very keen to have a go at it so I think we are looking at something great for a national roll out."

Dr Mason believes one of the main reasons the program has been such a success is because he adopted a very simple proposal—free dental care for an in-need group—and then invited both practitioners and patients to take part.

"There is nothing worse than dentists joining a scheme with the very best of intentions, but it ends up being so complicated that they get put off," he says. "It is also important to have a solid nucleus of practitioners so that no one is overloaded with patients.

"It would be fantastic for this to spread, but it really has to be in conjunction with Legacy. At this stage, I just want to plant the seed in other dentists' minds for them to consider if the scheme might be suitable for them."

Simplicity, he adds, is the key to taking

a scheme that has worked so effectively in his own state to functioning on a bigger stage from coast to coast.

"Legacy Smiles really is as simple as it sounds. The dentist joins the scheme, Legacy makes contact with the name of a patient to treat, and all the dentist has to do is agree to see the child, free of charge on the day they arrive at the practice.

"If it does come to Legacy Smiles being rolled out as a national program, I am willing to guide other dentists through the process. Legacy South Australia has been very keen to promote the scheme and I know they too would like to see this take off around the country.

"At this stage, it is still in its infancy, but we have big hopes that one day all Legacy children across Australia will be able to access free dental care."

For further details about Legacy Smiles, contact Legacy in your own state, or Dr Mason on casm@internode.on.net. □