



Continuing regional support

Phase II of the Australia Timor-Leste Program of Assistance for Secondary Services program continues support for the Timorese health system

In July 2012, Timor Leste held its third ever parliamentary elections. The ballot was seen as a litmus test for the young democracy, with the UN declaring it would withdraw its 1,300 strong police force if the elections passed peacefully. They did – giving yet another encouraging sign that Asia's newest nation is increasingly ready to stand on its own.

The College began its involvement with Timor Leste in 2001. The AusAID-funded initiative focused on providing essential clinical services and training opportunities in an incredibly challenging post-conflict environment. The health system has improved over the years, and the College program has evolved accordingly. In July of this year, the initiative entered a new phase, a phase reflective of the changing health priorities and capabilities of Timor Leste.

The new program, Australia Timor-Leste Program of Assistance for

Secondary Services (ATLASS Phase II) ensures continued, targeted and appropriate support is provided to the Timorese health system. ATLASS II is highly focused on education, capacity building and maternal and child health, rather than general service delivery. While surgical team visits will still take place, they also have a greater training and mentoring focus, with Australian and New Zealand Fellows working alongside Timorese doctors in theatre.

A key component of ATLASS II will be supporting Ministry of Health staff to mentor and supervise more than 500 local doctors, trained in Cuba, who are expected to return home during the next two years. Victorian general surgeon Mr Glenn Guest, who was one of the first Australian surgeons to work in Timor Leste following independence, continues in his role as Project Director of ATLASS.

"Timor Leste is about to undergo a

huge change that will see its medical workforce grow from the current level of 60 doctors to more than 500 when those trained in Cuba come home," explained Mr Guest.

The returning doctors enter a two-year internship program at district hospitals across the country. On completion of the internship program, some will go directly to work in the district hospitals, community health centres, and health posts, and others will continue on to develop specialist skills.

"Those going onto further studies are young doctors who have not yet received specialist training, so we will focus on providing basic skills in surgery, obstetrics, anaesthesia, paediatrics and internal medicine.

"This will be delivered through five 18-month diploma courses which are due to begin in August this year.

"For the surgical diploma course we



Dr Nilton Tilmaan who is a Timorese doctor currently supported by RACS in training in PNG

Dr Glen Guest RACS General Surgeon on a Ward Round in Dili

will provide basic surgical skills such as suturing trauma wounds, conducting C Section surgery and skin grafts. Some of the participating doctors may also be eligible to go on to further specialist training overseas.

"Our aim over the next few years is to support the new Timorese doctors and specialists as they embark on their careers with mentoring, training and support so they can provide essential services competently and safely wherever they work."

The second phase of the program will also focus on maternal and neonatal health care and provide continued mentoring and professional development support for existing surgeons and specialists. The in-country specialist team will be expanded to include an obstetrician and paediatrician, to work together with the existing general surgeon, orthopaedic surgeon, anaesthetist and emergency physician. All these positions will have both a clinical and training focus.

"ATLASS Phase II represents a significant step forward in helping Timor Leste develop an effective and self-sufficient health system," Mr Guest said.

"As more Timorese doctors take on more work, visiting teams with a clinical focus will be phased out and replaced with educational teams in consultation with the Ministry of Health and the requirements of the local workforce."

These teams, including plastic and reconstructive surgery, urology and ENT, are instrumental in providing on-the-job training to the local counterparts.

"We also plan to offer selected on-going training or refresher opportunities in Australia and New Zealand while specialists from here will be funded to travel to Timor Leste to deliver courses either at the General Hospital in Dili or through the University of Timor Leste."

Since Australia first began providing support in 2001, the College has helped Timor Leste become self-sufficient in basic anaesthesia services, through the training of 21 nurse anaesthetists who are solely responsible for the provision of safe anaesthetics in the districts. The College has also enabled the training of the country's first ophthalmologist, anaesthetist and second general surgeon.

Mr Guest, who works out of the Geelong Hospital in Victoria and who has a special interest in colorectal surgery, took up one of the first long-term positions of Australian Surgeon to Timor Leste in 2002, following the traumatic struggle for independence.

Having long held an interest in providing surgical skills to the people of a developing country, Mr Guest and his wife spent 18 months in Timor Leste and returned for six months in 2004. Mr Guest has since made a dozen more visits to the country.

"When I first arrived in 2002, Dili was a burnt-out wreck," he said.

"The hospital was still standing, but it had no skilled personnel to run it and little if any working equipment.

"When you consider that the country is only ten years old, I think it's fair to say they have achieved more than anyone could have expected and it has always felt a privilege to me to be able to assist them."

Mr Guest said ATLASS Phase II builds on the success of the RACS' involvement in Timor Leste and praised former Project Director Professor David Scott and those Fellows who had gone before him.

"AusAID has been very impressed with the work the RACS has done through ATLASS and the Ministry of Health in Timor Leste made it very clear how enthusiastic they were to have us continue our involvement," he said.

"Although the specialist surgical expertise provided by Fellows has been vital to the program, so too has been the support of the International Development office, particularly Daliah Moss and her team, who have kept the program running smoothly.

"All of us involved in this are working to a long-term plan on the understanding that it will take up to 20 years for Timor Leste to achieve a self-sufficient and effective medical workforce. With AusAID support, ATLASS Phase II is one way to help achieve that."