



Newly qualified East Timorese Anaesthetic Nurses with course leaders Dr Brian Spain and Dr Eric Vreede



From L-R: Dr Eric Vreede, Dr Ronald Beck and Dr Glenn Guest.

Building anaesthetic services in Timor Leste

Dr Eric Vreede has been a huge influence in developing independent anaesthetist health care in Timor Leste, soon to deliver the first fully-qualified, locally-born anaesthetist, Dr Flavio De Araujo (Dr Edy)

For the first time since gaining Independence, Timor Leste is now in a position to provide anaesthesia in every hospital across the nation.

Through College support and coordination, AusAID funding and the tireless efforts of Dili-based anaesthetist Dr Eric Vreede, 21 nurse anaesthetists from Dili National Hospital and the five regional hospitals have now passed their formal one-year training course.

According to Dr Vreede, all 21 practitioners are now able to provide Ketamine, Spinal and General Anaesthesia (with or without intubation) in more than 90 per cent of cases as well as managing pre-operative assessment, resuscitation and emergencies.

The training has been provided through the College's international development project known as the Australia Timor Leste Assistance for Specialist Services (ATLASS) program.

To add to the significance of the milestone, Timor Leste's first fully-qualified, locally-born anaesthetist, Dr Flavio De Araujo (or Dr Edy as he is known) will soon return to Timor Leste after completing his Masters of Medicine Degree at the Fiji School of Medicine.

Dr Vreede, who has been in Timor Leste for almost seven years, acted as Dr Edy's mentor and described the success of his studies and the training of the nurses as being of great significance in the provision of quality care for the people of Timor Leste.

"Timor Leste currently has three anaesthetists, all of us (internationals) are based at the National Hospital in Dili, so to now have nurse anaesthetists across the country is a great achievement," he said.

"Over the 10 years the program and its predecessor have been running, the nurses chosen for training have spent one year based in Dili undertaking both formal classes and competency-based skills development working alongside us in theatre.

"They are all back working in their regional

hospitals so that we are now in a position to offer an anaesthetic service in every hospital in Timor Leste, which is pretty remarkable given that only six years ago the only anaesthetic service provided was located in Dili.

"The nurses are very good at what they do, extremely diligent and committed, and provide a high quality service, which was the central aim of the training and the ATLASS program."

The courses, designed by Dr Vreede (and his anaesthetic colleagues from Australia), and endorsed by the Ministry of Health and the Institute for Health Sciences in Timor Leste, began in 2004 with the first nine nurse anaesthetists certified to practice in 2005. The courses would not have succeeded without the enormous support of a number of anaesthetists from Australia, particularly Dr Brian Spain and Dr Haydn Perndt who have been instrumental in the delivery of the training program.

Dr Vreede said the provision of an anaesthetic service particularly in regional areas was crucial given the determination of the national health authorities and international aid organisations to reduce the rate of maternal mortality in Timor Leste.

"One of the central pressing needs for anaesthesia in Timor Leste has long been the need to be able to provide caesarean sections to mothers with complications of pregnancy," he said.

"Maternal mortality is still quite high here so the more anaesthetists, the more caesarean sections that can be done and hopefully fewer women will die.

"But even broader than this, before there were anaesthetic services in regional hospitals, many sick people were told they had to travel to Dili for treatment but many people couldn't, either because they couldn't afford to travel or leave their homes for any extended period of time, so many just did not receive the care they needed.

"Now, to have qualified staff to support the doctors so they can provide the necessary care

when and where people need it is a wonderful achievement."

Dr Vreede first arrived in Timor Leste in 2004 as an employee of the Ministry of Health before becoming the long term anaesthetist and Team Leader of the ATLASS program. Dr Vreede is also the head of the Anaesthesia Department at Dili National Hospital.

Clearly a man who relishes a challenge, before arriving there he spent three years establishing a Nurse Anaesthetist course in war-torn Sierra Leone in West Africa.

"I've always had a great interest in helping to provide anaesthesia and anaesthetic services in developing countries," he said.

"It's of great practical use in such countries, it can make a significant difference to the quality of health care provided to the people and is greatly rewarding."

Dr Vreede said that he hoped that some of the 700 Timorese doctors now in training in Cuba would choose to specialise in anaesthesia in coming years.

However, he said even with the provision of the nurse anaesthetists and the training of more doctors, Timor Leste still needs the specialist surgical team visits provided through the College.

"Timor Leste only has two nationals trained as general surgeons so it is still too early to think about specialisation," Dr Vreede said.

"It will probably take another 10 years before that becomes a realistic issue and until then the people of Timor Leste still need the services of the resident advisers (emergency physician, anaesthetist, and general surgeon), and the specialist teams.

"Funding for the program ends in June 2011 but we hope that AusAID will see the wisdom of extending that support because there is still much to be done."

Dr Vreede said he greatly enjoys his life in Timor Leste and said any sense of professional isolation was assuaged by his close contact

with Australian and New Zealand surgeons and anaesthetists.

"Life's great here in Timor Leste ; the people, the culture the climate, the two-minute commute to work," he said.

"It can be professionally lonely at times but I enjoy working with the specialist teams when they visit, I go to conferences and consult with colleagues overseas to talk about cases and developments in the field so it rarely becomes a problem.

"I'd like to stay here for the next few years.

"Helping to design a nurse anaesthetist course and now having a certified practitioner in every hospital is an undoubted highlight of my time here.

"Then having Dr Edy back will feel like a significant moment not just on a personal level but in terms of Timor Leste incrementally moving to become self-sufficient in the provision of quality health care.

"I worked with Dr Edy during the first 18-months of his training, so his return will definitely feel like a closing of the loop."

The College's Timor Leste program lists the provision of nurse anaesthetists in every hospital as one of its most significant achievements.

Yet it does not stand in isolation. Since 2001, the program has also trained the country's first ophthalmologist, placed and supported Timorese surgical trainees in specialist training programs across the Asia-Pacific region and advanced the skills of more than 80 Timorese medical personnel through trauma and burns management courses.

More directly, visiting surgical teams funded under the program have conducted more than 8000 life-changing surgical procedures and treated and examined up to 42,500 sick and injured patients.

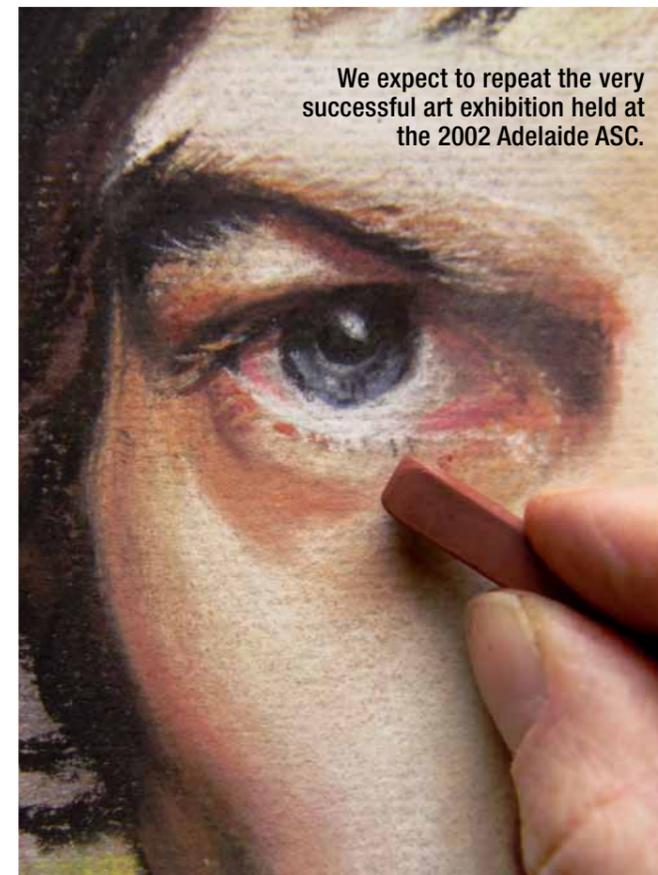
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