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Dentistry at Sea - Making Waves Today and Beyond

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Abstract

The Australian Defence Force defines its role in the ever-dynamic global context as the defence of Australia's sovereignty and national interests in order to maintain security and prosperity. Chief of Navy's Plan Pelorus 2022 sees the continuation of Task Group deployments, steering away from the typical single ship deployments of the recent past, in order to project a sustained joint force to fight and win at sea. Consequently, more service personnel are deployed simultaneously and often for extended periods. In a pervasive and protracted COVID-19 environment, where access to shore services – even within the National Support Base – is riddled with obstacles, dentistry at sea is ever important in collaborative health support to enable capability.

Since its establishment in 1919, the Royal Australian Navy Dental Branch has seen shifts in its role and purpose, especially in the sphere of deployed dentistry. This presentation will touch on how Navy Dentistry has evolved in the twenty-first century and the role of the deployed dental team at sea in the future.

A 'prestige' has traditionally been associated with having a dental team afloat using portable dental units; Commands toted teams as capability enablers, and indeed medical evacuations have been avoided during operational tasking thanks to an embarked dental team. This is particularly crucial for 'ship-stoppers' in the maritime environment, where there is huge logistical burden and financial cost to replace a deployed member. Deployments were not necessarily part of a task force and dental teams provided risk mitigation for long deployments away from the Australian station, such as Middle East rotations or Exercise RIMPAC.

In the last five years, this trend has been consolidated. Mobile dental teams continue to serve the role of capability enablers through prevention or management of acute dental emergencies and support to health staff. However, they primarily operate from a fixed dental surgery afloat within

a large Joint Task Group that comprises multiple fleet platforms and substantial elements from other Services and organisations. These deployments can see the Task Group away months at a time from the Australian station with over 1000 personnel aboard a single vessel. The team must coordinate with other embedded task group elements regarding transport of patients if ships are sailing in company and in vicinity, or align appointments with port visits alongside. This too must be negotiated around movement and 'exercise' plans in order to decrease risk to mission.

There are considerations unique to the sea environment that include limited physical space, sea state and stability of platforms, and equipment failure with no access to dedicated technicians. Dental officers also must appreciate risk and consequence of all treatment options when treating patients, without access to specialist services. Even beyond the dental surgery, the dental team supports the deployed hospital, especially in resuscitation capability and sterilisation.

As our Navy continues to upscale our presence in the maritime environment, will the deployed dental team remain as pertinent as ever in relation to Defence personnel staying Fit to Bite, Fit to Fight?

Biography

LCDR Shannon Godfrey joined the Royal Australian Navy as an undergraduate dentist while studying at the University of Melbourne. LCDR Godfrey served in various fleet units as a Fleet Mobile Dental Officer, ranging from frigates to tankers, on a number of exercises and operations. During that period, she attained Fellowship with the Royal Australian College of Dental Surgeons and enjoyed working part-time in civilian practice. The most rewarding part of LCDR Godfrey's career was mentoring junior Navy dental officers at HMAS Stirling, prior to a staff officer role within the policy realm. LCDR Godfrey is currently the Fleet Dental Officer and is responsible for managing the Fleet Mobile Dental Teams, as well as assessing and advising Command and deployed health personnel on fleet dental issues.

LEUT Jessica Kuk joined the RAN as an undergraduate dentist studying at University of Adelaide. She began her Naval dental career under mentorship of LCDR Godfrey, prior to serving as a Fleet Mobile Dental Officer on both LHDs and HMAS Sirius. LEUT Kuk is currently enjoying a posting to HMAS Cairns, providing dental support to crews of hydrographic survey and patrol vessels, whilst studying a Master of Science in Medicine (Pain Management) Orofacial Pain.