



28 SEP, 2023

VOLUNTEER of the WEEK



That's Life, National



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of the
WEEK

Jan, 71, has spent more than 37 years saving lives overseas

Well, that sounds interesting, I thought, listening to a couple of plastic surgeons at work share their experience of volunteering overseas.

It was 1986 and, aged 34, I was working as a ward nurse. I looked after patients with congenital abnormalities and trauma injuries at the Victorian Plastic Surgery Unit.

I was at a tutorial, and the surgeons were discussing difficult cases they'd seen while overseas with an organisation called Interplast Australia & New Zealand.

It was first formed in 1969 after American plastic surgeon Dr Donald Laub operated on a South American boy with a cleft palate and lip.

The condition was misunderstood and local doctors didn't know how to treat him.

Spurred on, Dr Laub arranged for his colleagues to volunteer and teach plastic surgery skills to doctors internationally.

The good cause soon caught on, and Interplast

Thank you
Jan Rice
Melbourne, Vic

Australia & New Zealand formed in 1983. Since then it's been sending plastic surgeons, nurses and other allied health professionals to countries in the Asia Pacific region.

The team treats burn victims, patients with cleft palates and lips, people affected by tumours, birth defects, and other

disfiguring conditions. They also teach local doctors and nurses the necessary skills to treat patients themselves.

I'd been a nurse since 1970 and was also an Army Reserve volunteer. Helping people is part of who I am, so I signed up immediately.

My first trip was to Fiji that year with a plastic surgeon. He educated local doctors on surgeries and skin grafts for burns, while I talked

to nurses about aftercare. 'It's important to keep the burn clean to prevent infection,' I explained, showing them how to change a dressing.

I also ran a breast self-awareness program in the Solomon Islands in 2016. We'd gone there to treat patients needing plastic surgery, but the hospital was full of women with breast cancer so advanced it was too late for surgery or treatment.

I taught groups of women, sometimes three generations from the one family, how to check their breasts for lumps.

'Breast cancer that's found early can be treated with surgery, which may save your life,' I told them.



Cleaning up a wound in PNG



This baby had cleft lip surgery

64 www.thatslife.com.au



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Me with senior ward nurses in the Solomon Islands

Teaching breast self examination in Papua New Guinea



On my last trip to Bangladesh in 2019, the hospital was so overrun with burns victims, staff didn't have time to change dressings, and infection was becoming a problem.

'I can teach the mothers to change their children's dressings,' I offered.

I'll never forget the look on one mum's face when I showed her how to dress her son's burns. It was the same look of gratitude and pride I'd seen on the faces of those in the Solomons.

Passing on the knowledge for others to care for their own health, and the health of the ones they love, fills me with pride.

After the 2004 tsunami in the Aceh Province of Indonesia, I spent seven weeks on a mission to remote locations searching for people needing surgery.

One beautiful young man, aged about 16, had his arm so badly crushed by a falling building I knew it would need amputating.

All I could do was dress his wound and show him kindness until a helicopter took him to the United States hospital ship *Mercy* for surgery. His is one of many faces I think of often.

I've learned so much through volunteering with Interplast. In Australia,

I can open a hospital cupboard and find everything I need, but in some hospitals I've visited,

they don't even have access to water.

It's a challenge to teach people how to use what they have to improve the quality of care. And using such strategies is what Interplast did when Covid prevented travel. We continued volunteering

It's opened my eyes to how lucky we are

through online webinars.

You have to be mentally and physically fit for this work. Some patients are so remote, I've had to take several planes, and a boat, then had a long walk just to reach them.

The days are long and in tropical locations it can be terribly hot working in rudimentary conditions.

But I love every minute. Since I began volunteering, I've done 25 trips, including Samoa, Papua New Guinea and the Cook Islands.

Volunteering has opened my eyes and mind, not only to how lucky we are to have quality healthcare, but also to how gracious and content people in other countries are while

having very little.

The people we see aren't asking much. They're asking for a baby's cleft palate to be repaired so they can speak, or for burned skin that's tight to be repaired so they can use their hands to work.

Interplast Australia & New Zealand is celebrating its 40th year, and our goal is to do ourselves out of a job by repairing bodies and rebuilding lives.

We don't just patch people up and send them on their way – we teach and educate people wherever we go so that hopefully, one day, we'll no longer be needed. ●

As told to **Samantha Ireland**
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