

# **INTERPLAST IN MYANMAR- A REVIEW OF PROGRAMS 2001-2017**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*'We want to educate our own plastic surgeons.'*

Since conducting its first needs assessment in Myanmar in 2000, and delivering its first program in 2001, *Interplast* Australia and New Zealand (*Interplast*) has supported local partners in the work towards improving access to plastic and reconstructive surgical services for the people of Myanmar. The first five years of the program focused on general plastic and reconstructive surgical services, addressing the high demand of patients requiring treatment, and subsequent years have shifted focus to be that of building local capacity so that the medical and nursing professionals in Myanmar provide these clinical services themselves.

When *Interplast* first visited Myanmar, there were just three surgeons providing plastic and reconstructive surgery to a population of 49 million people, with no local training program.

Although *Interplast* was invited to perform surgery, the focus of each visit included provision of hands-on training and lectures. Since 2003 *Interplast* programs have supported Myanmar to train enough specialists so that a local plastic and reconstructive training program could be established. Over its 16 years of providing programs in Myanmar, *Interplast* has adapted its program objectives to meet evolving needs identified in consultation with partners and stakeholders.

At the time of writing this report, Myanmar now has 12 fully qualified plastic and reconstructive surgeons, with a further 20 at various points in the locally run Masters and Doctorate of Plastic Surgery training programs, run through the University of Medicine 1, Yangon. There are now plastic surgery units in 3 major hospitals around the country (Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw). While *Interplast* has played a significant role in this achievement, it has been the long-standing commitment and hard work of local partners who have driven these results.

*Interplast* programs are about sustainability, and its surgical services have provided training opportunities for local medical personnel. Stakeholders and partners have been, and remain, strong supporters of the work that *Interplast* has done in Myanmar; and although the programs have assisted in improving access, the primary focus has always been capacity building. *Interplast's* ultimate goal is to support local partner efforts to increase the numbers of skilled plastic and reconstructive surgeons, improving access to those services for people who require them. The number and type of programs increased and evolved over time, but the core aim remains:

*To improve access for the people of Myanmar to plastic and reconstructive surgical services.*

This review has found that by building local surgical capacity, *Interplast* has helped to train surgeons, anaesthetists and nurses; in the operating theatre during surgeries, and on wards where *Interplast* trains local medical teams in pre and post-operative patient care. *Interplast* has been integral in supporting the development of local training programs and facilitating training placements in Australia.

Specialist reconstructive surgeons have undertaken components of training in Australia and returned to Myanmar to pass on skills by training local surgeons.

Addressing the shortage of local trained plastic surgeons requires a long-term commitment. An important milestone in this work was the establishment of the country's first local postgraduate training program in reconstructive surgery, an award delivered through the University of Medicine 1 in Yangon. Funding from the Australian Government's Australian Non-Government Cooperation Program enabled *Interplast* to support local partners to develop the postgraduate program which trains surgeons from the Department of Plastic, Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery at the Yangon General Hospital.

The commencement of the Doctorate in Plastic Surgery, and the Masters in Plastic Surgery have been major achievements, particularly as previously there were no formal training programs in Myanmar for plastic surgery. As of 2018, 12 fully qualified plastic and reconstructive surgeons serve a population of 53 million people. Although this is well below the needs of the population, the establishment of the Doctorate and Masters qualifications have seen numbers grow and this should continue, with 20 trainees currently undertaking formal qualifications, and 3 having completed the new Doctorate program.

Nurse education is another area where *Interplast* programs have had a significant impact. Nurses have received substantial skills development and have participated in training sessions and bedside education whilst undertaking ward rounds; with training focused on patient care including blood pressure monitoring, the use of medication charts and admission forms and procedures for hand hygiene. Training also focused on post-operative care including patient recovery, wound management and recovery room and emergency equipment set-up, as well as the identification of and response to the deteriorating patient.

Nurses who have completed training placements in Australia are making changes to their workplace based on their observations and experiences of working beside their Australian counterparts in Australian hospitals; passing on their skills to their colleagues and contributing to improved procedures and knowledge, which is then applied on the ward, leading to improved patient care.

Although there are a number of key areas of need where *Interplast* is yet to make significant inroads; for example, anesthetic services, *Interplast* and Myanmar's plastic surgeons, nurses and anesthetists have been slowly growing the numbers of skilled medical personnel and improving patient outcomes.

The program has had to work with consideration to local challenges including shortages in equipment, drugs and consumables; a lack of standard processes in some areas; and a strict hierarchical culture which can impede training and one on one mentoring. Language barriers between *Interplast* volunteers and some local counterparts have also been challenging at times, not only during training and surgical procedures in Myanmar, but also in limiting training opportunities for some candidates who must meet English language requirements before gaining entry to undertake hands-on training placements in Australia. Despite these challenges, since its first program commenced, *Interplast* has seen a notable improvement of the profile of plastic and reconstructive surgery in Myanmar.

Some of the **key findings** of the review are:

- The support provided by *Interplast* is having a measurable impact on capacity building of plastic and reconstructive surgical services in Myanmar. The program has tangible benefits for surgeons and the broader medical teams; increased knowledge and surgical skills in microsurgery, resection, skin grafts, contracture release; better patient assessment and management, from determining treatment plans and helping with decision making, to post-operative patient management.
- From the outset *Interplast's* mission has been to build local capacity. It has done this through its education program and by working alongside local surgical teams, imparting skills and knowledge. Whilst volunteer teams have provided surgical services, the focus has been to use surgeries – particularly complex cases – to train and build skills and confidence.
- The assistance of the visiting teams doesn't end on their return to Australia; they provide their Myanmar counterparts with ongoing support via email and by providing teaching and learning materials.
- Where possible, *Interplast* teams have worked within Myanmar's hospital system, using locally available equipment rather than relying on equipment from Australia that is not routinely available in Myanmar. Whilst this has not been without its challenges, the approach has contributed to capacity building, and sustainability of the program. Local medical personnel are trained in their own environments, and from using the locally available equipment and supplies, are able to apply their knowledge within their own systems.
- Respondents to interviews, conducted during March 2018 at the Yangon General Hospital (surgeons, nurses and anesthetists), were all supportive of *Interplast* continuing its programs and conducting three visits a year.
- Whilst Myanmar's trainee and qualified plastic surgeons, nurses and anesthetists have appreciated being able to work alongside the volunteer teams, an important outcome has been a growth in skills and confidence. Training and education has been a major benefit; with greater surgical skills and more self-assurance, local teams can manage most cases.
  - This shift from undertaking surgery to having local surgeons take the lead in more complex cases has been empowering for local surgeons. Volunteer surgeons observe and advise trainee surgeons, which takes time and patience but results in greater confidence and skills building for the trainees. As a result local surgeons are taking on more complex cases.
- Placements in Australia have been catalytic in bringing positive changes to workplace culture. One volunteer noted that the biggest changes have come from hosting nurses and surgeons in Australia. They can then return and translate what they have learnt into their own way of doing things.

- There are some areas that remain a challenge and can inhibit progress; particularly language barriers. Competency in English language, particularly in meeting the rigorous requirements of the IELTS is a major barrier to participation in longer term training placements in Australia.

Based on the findings of the desk review, interviews with *Interplast* personnel and with stakeholders in Myanmar, this review makes the following **recommendations**:

1. *Interplast* to support its Myanmar partners to develop a national strategy for the provision of plastic and reconstructive surgical services in Myanmar.
2. *Interplast* to continue with three annual visits to Myanmar (in line with ongoing local requests and within three-year strategies and annual country plans).
3. *Interplast* to continue providing support to teaching advanced reconstructive surgical techniques, as identified by local partners and consistent with their training and development needs.
4. *Interplast* to continue to facilitate training placements in Australia for surgeons, nurses and anaesthetists, in line with qualifications and professional development requirements in Myanmar.
5. To improve local standards of basic and advanced life support education (BLS and ALS), *Interplast* and its Myanmar partners explore training options for BLS and ALS to be delivered locally.
6. *Interplast* to continue the nurse education program, with a focus particularly on care of patients who have had advanced surgery, and to ensure that nurse skills training keeps pace with the skills of the surgeons; and consider broadening nurse training to include other areas of the Yangon General Hospital.
7. *Interplast* and its Myanmar partners agree on, and develop, a training and lecture plan for the year, covering topics and areas of need that are identified by local teams at the Yangon General Hospital.
8. *Interplast* and its Myanmar partners to agree on an annual program plan, so that upcoming training and professional development activities are agreed and understood prior to each visit.
9. To reduce its reliance on a narrow funding source, *Interplast* will explore opportunities to establish a broader funding base for its Myanmar programs.
10. *Interplast* to continue to survey a cross section of volunteers and program beneficiaries on a biennial basis.
11. To address the barriers arising from IELTS requirements and processes to training opportunities in Australia, *Interplast* and its partners in Myanmar should investigate alternative options for candidates to meet English language competency.

12. *Interplast* and its partners investigate options to ensure that there are appropriately skilled interpreters available for all training delivered to nurses in Myanmar.

13. To address the prohibitive costs to patients, and to improve access to pre and post-operative care, *Interplast* to identify a small fund to enable the purchase of dressings and medication, and diagnostic services, to be allocated on a case by case basis.

*Interplast* appreciates the support of:

- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade - Australian Non-Government Organisation Cooperation program (ANCP);
- The Baker Foundation; and
- Rotary Clubs in Australia and New Zealand.

*Interplast* programs are made possible by the dedication and commitment of its many volunteers working in the Asia Pacific region who give generously of their time, expertise and support.

This review was made possible by funding provided in 2017-18 by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).

***If you would like further details on *Interplast's* programs in Myanmar, or a copy of the full report, please contact: [contactus@interplast.org.au](mailto:contactus@interplast.org.au)***